

Giving to God First

1 Chronicles 29:10-20

November 17, 2019

Please make sure to read 1 Chronicles 29:10-20 before going any further in this transcript.

Today's sermon is on Giving to God First. One of the ways that many Christ-followers chose to give to God first, is by tithing. Tithing is the biblical concept of giving the first 10% of our income to God. For those of us who are already practicing tithing, a sermon like this may feel welcome. It affirms a discipleship behavior that we have already deemed as important; and we are already putting it into practice. However, for those of us who aren't giving to God or who are giving less than 10%, a sermon like this may feel a little awkward. In fact, it might even feel intimidating, or even a little threatening. Today, our intent is not to make anyone feel uncomfortable or to commit a "drive by guilt." ¹ Our intent, is to thoughtfully, and carefully, consider what God's Word has to teach us about financial giving. ² So let's approach it with a genuine desire for clarity from God's Word. With a desire to see if there is anything that God has to teach us this morning about "becoming fully devoted followers of Jesus together." Let's consider how we can honor God with our giving.

Just how important is giving to God? Does it really matter whether or not we give money to God? Can't we just focus our energies on attending worship services with other believers, on singing songs of praise, and on listening to the sermon? As long as we are obeying God's Word, and sharing our faith with the lost, and maybe volunteering in some area of ministry, isn't that enough for God? Does following Jesus really require us to give money to God? Well, let's think about those questions as we walk through this message together. Even a quick skimming of the Old Testament reveals a consistent connection between worshipping God and giving to God financially. The particular practice of tithing, has its roots in the Old Testament Nation of Israel.

1. Tithing began as an Old Testament practice. We see this talked about in many places including Leviticus 27:30-34, "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.... Every tithe of the herd and flock—every tenth animal that passes under the shepherd's rod—will be holy to the LORD...." These are the commands the LORD gave Moses at Mount Sinai for the Israelites." So these instructions were specifically laid out for how the Nation of Israel should operate. They were functioning under the rule and reign of Yahweh. A good understanding of tithing really requires an extensive amount of study of multiple texts throughout the Old Testament. ³ I've done much of that study this past week but we don't really have time to thoroughly go through all of the key passages. But if you are interested in digging in more, read through the footnotes in this transcript and look up the cross references. For now, let me share a good summary statement that I found in one of the footnotes in my NIV Study Bible: ⁴

1) Once a year, there was a 10% tithe of everything. A tithe of all the Israelite crops and animals were taken to the central place of worship for distribution to the Levites. (The Levites were sort of like the church staff of their day.)

2) At that yearly collection, there was a tithing festival at one central location. In other words, all of the "Israelites ate part of the tithe [together]. ⁵ The rest, which would be by far the major part of it,

¹ I heard this phrase from Pastor Matt Chandler.

² So, let's begin by recognizing the importance of approaching our giving with a right attitude. For those of us who are already tithing, let's beware of an attitude of unhealthy spiritual pride. Consistent tithing can be a wonderful way to honor God with our finances. But it can also have an unintentional impact of making us overconfident in our own spirituality. We read about this in places like Luke 18:9-12, "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: **'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'**" It's easy for any one of us to fall into spiritual haughtiness. So, as we begin, let's be aware of this kind of dangerous and unattractive attitude. For those of us who are not tithing, let's beware of an attitude of avoidance or distrust: "oh man, here we go! The church is trying to get my money again!" Rather than approaching tithing in one of these ways, let's approach it with a genuine desire for clarity from God's Word.

³ Some of the best, key texts include Leviticus 27:30-34, Numbers 18:21-29, and Deuteronomy 14:22-29.

⁴ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 281.

⁵ This annual shared feast makes even more sense in light of Leviticus 23:14.

belonged to the Levites.” (This was a HUGE annual celebration, that the whole nation would have together. Everyone would eat and celebrate as the tithes were being brought in. The central location changed over the course of Israel’s history, but ultimately it ended up in Jerusalem.⁶ It was sort of like a HUGE potluck where everyone would leave all kinds of extra groceries to provide for the Levites for the upcoming year. This may sound strange to us. Why have just one HUGE annual collection, rather than consistent weekly or monthly collections? But in a community of farmers, people basically got “paid” once a year, at harvesttime. So, they had a Harvest Festival.)

3) “Every 3rd year the tithe was gathered at the various towns and stored for distribution. This tithe would go to the Levites and [all of the refugees, orphans, and widows].” These people were spread out, living within these various towns.⁷ (This particular tithe, every 3 years, was basically the way that the Israelites stocked up their local Food Shelves & Benevolence Funds.)⁸ This probably leaves most of us wondering, why these particular 4 groups of people; why Levites, refugees, orphans, and widows? The answer is pretty straightforward: In an agrarian society, these are the people who didn’t own any land.⁹ Therefore, they had no natural means of supporting themselves.¹⁰ Here’s the thing to realize: if the Israelites weren’t faithful to pay their tithes, it literally meant that they were taking the food out of other people’s mouths. This included some of the most vulnerable people imaginable.¹¹ Admittedly, this is only a boiled down, simplification of the tithing system. It doesn’t even begin to consider the various freewill offerings, and other special gifts.¹² This is just the basic gist of tithing.¹³

Probably the best-known Old Testament passage on tithing is Malachi 3:8-10, “Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, ‘How are we robbing you?’ In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me. 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 there will not be room enough to store it.” This passage makes it abundantly clear that, at least in OT times, for the Nation of Israel, the tithe was not merely a suggestion but rather a command! So, a pivotal question for us today is this:

2. Does tithing still apply to Christ-followers today? Here’s the answer... maybe. Or, maybe not. This is actually a hotly debated question among pastors and Christian scholars. And frankly, even after someone has studied through all of the biblical texts, it’s still difficult to be adamant either way. A key problem here is the argument from silence. We don’t find any explicit reference to a continuing practice of tithing in the New Testament church.¹⁴ The strongest argument that I’ve heard for the possibility of practicing tithing under the new covenant, is a theory presented by Pastor John Piper.

In 1 Corinthians 9, the Apostle Paul is writing about the rights of those who preach the gospel to receive their living from the gospel. As Paul is writing, he does it in the context of his own choice NOT

⁶ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 278 (footnote on Deuteronomy 12:5).

⁷ Deuteronomy 26:12 tells us, “When you have finished setting aside a tenth of all your produce in the third year, the year of the tithe, you shall give it to the Levite, the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied.”

⁸ In other words, there was an aspect to tithing that was both religious and communal.

⁹ See Deuteronomy 18:1-2 for why the Levites didn’t own land.

¹⁰ *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 340.

¹¹ Consider Nehemiah 13:10-11. God expects the spiritual leaders to be provided for so that they can fulfill their spiritual responsibilities. Also note Malachi 3:10, “Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house....” God expects the needy to be provided for.

¹² For example, see Deuteronomy 12:17.

¹³ The Bible doesn’t really say why the percentage was 10%. Why not 7% or 12%? After all, those are good biblical numbers. But, apparently 10% just happened to be how much it would take to meet these various needs. Perhaps 10% also made for easy math. 1 out of every 10 animals, 1 out of every 10 bushels of wheat, and so on. Even today, those who tithe 10% have easy math. If you are wondering how to compute a 10% tithe, it’s pretty simple. Just round off your paycheck to the nearest dollar and then remove the number on the far righthand side. So, if your paycheck is \$100, remove one zero, and your tithe is \$10. If your paycheck is \$500, remove one zero, and your tithe is \$50. And so on. To be clear though, tithing was NOT giving God His 10% and then keeping MY 90%. Everything we have belongs to God; ALL 100% is His. He graciously delegates the responsibility to His people to steward all things for His glory.

¹⁴ Jesus does mention that it was right for the Pharisees to tithe, but they were still under the Old Testament Law at this point in history. See Matthew 23:23. Some have argued that verses like Matthew 10:10 support the idea of tithing but that is unlikely, at least in the literal sense of receiving 10%.

to receive any financial help, but rather to support himself in other ways. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 9:12, "If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ." Nonetheless, the Apostle Paul goes on to make an interesting connection between Old Testament giving and New Testament giving. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:13, "Don't you know that **those who serve in the temple get their food from the temple**, and that **those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar**?" Here in verse 13, Paul is reminding them of the familiar Old Testament way of supporting religious workers, through people's tithes. He then goes on to say in 1 Corinthians 9:14, "In the same way, the Lord has commanded that **those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel**." That phrase "in the same way" is subject to differing interpretation. The context is not quite as clear as we might like it to be. In other words, just what is being conveyed by the phrase "IN THE SAME WAY"? John Piper explains two possibilities: **The 1st possibility** is this: although Paul doesn't explicitly use the word "tithe," he is referring to the Old Testament tithing system. So when he says, "IN THE SAME WAY," he means that New Testament Christian workers should get paid from the tithes of other Christians. **The 2nd possibility** is this: Paul is simply referring to a broader, more general principle of giving to God, NOT tithing in particular. Therefore, when he says, "IN THE SAME WAY," he simply means that the offerings of other Christians should support those working in Christian ministry. In other words, the generous offerings of other believers, NOT specific 10% tithes, are meant to be used to pay for pastors, church staff, global partners, and so on. As we consider these 2 possibilities, New Testament tithing is still unclear. While it's certainly a possibility, it is NOT a forgone conclusion. We just don't have enough data here to be conclusive EITHER way.¹⁵

So that said, REGARDLESS of where each of us may land in this tithing debate,¹⁶ I am STILL going to suggest tithing. There are MANY, very good reasons why Christ-followers should consider tithing at least 10% of their income.

Giving to God by tithing can be...

1 ...a good place to start. It is simple math, that gets us going in the good direction of having a generous heart. It's very natural for our hearts to lovingly respond to God in worship. Just like singing a song or living out an obedient life, one of the ways that we can express our worship to God is by bringing Him a financial offering. The word worship is directly related to the idea of "worth." We often characterize the value of certain things in our world by how much they are "worth" or how much they cost. Therefore, one way of demonstrating God's worth is through worshipful giving. A 10% tithe is a good place to start. Or at least a good goal to work toward if you're starting from zero. You may want to begin at 2-3% and then work your way up to 10% over time. Giving to God by tithing can also be...

2 ...a demonstration of our trust in God's provision. Giving to God reveals that we trust Him to provide us with MORE than we need to live on. God gives us an abundant provision SO THAT we can be generous in His name. SO THAT we can give toward His purposes in this world. Put another way, tithing demonstrates God's faithfulness. I trust in God's faithful provision so much, that I will choose to live on 90% of what He provides me. Giving to God by tithing can also be...

3 ...an effective way of reaching the lost. Our consistent financial tithes fund the very supplies and ministry staff that are needed for evangelistic outreach. 2 Corinthians 8:9 reminds us, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich." In a similar way, we choose to sacrifice our financial

¹⁵ For several reasons, it is unwise for any of us to mandate tithing: One primary reason is that the New Testament application of tithing is far from clear. The reality of being people who are under the New Covenant and who are no longer under the Law, is significant. (See Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Hebrews 8:6-13. Also consider Matthew 9:14-17. Also ponder Matthew 5:17 and consider requesting the sermon transcript from February 3, 2019, "How the Bible Fits Together" on Matthew 5:17-20.)

Another key reason not to mandate tithing, is that clearly most of us in this room are not part of the Nation of Israel. We live in an American system of governance with things like social welfare programs, food shelves, and local church benevolence funds. Although tithing may indeed be valid today, it would be misleading to suggest that we can mandate it on the basis of comparing "apples to apples."

¹⁶ Once again I am encouraged by our Efree Church practice of majoring on the majors and minoring on the minors. The issue of tithing is not salvific and not something that we need to divide over or argue about. A good lively debate is always more than welcome though. 😊

comfort so that others may become spiritually rich. John Stott summarizes this nicely, “When we contribute to evangelistic enterprises, we are expressing our confidence that the gospel is God’s power for salvation, and that everybody has a right to hear it.... When we give to the maturing of the church, we acknowledge its centrality in God’s purpose and his desire for its maturity.”¹⁷ I’m sure that there are many other good reasons why Christ-followers might choose to give God a 10% tithe from their income.¹⁸ We don’t have time to cover them all. I hope that many of us will take some time to talk about this in our Life Groups this week. Rather than just talking about the discussion over tithing though...

3. Let’s focus on developing a generous heart. Whether we practice an official 10% tithe or not,¹⁹ we should be more concerned with how we give to God, rather than on how much we give to God. In other words, our heart attitude is really the most important component in Giving to God First. Earlier we read from 1 Chronicles. This passage served mostly as a kind of springboard into our topic of giving to God. The fact is, 1 Chronicles 29 doesn’t even mention tithing. But it does mention people’s attitude toward giving. That’s what really drew me to this text; God’s people consecrated themselves to the LORD with generous financial giving. They gave with willing hearts toward the financial needs of building God’s temple. In fact, God’s people rejoiced in this giving! 1 Chronicles 29:9 records, “The people rejoiced at the willing response of their leaders, for they had given freely and wholeheartedly to the LORD. David the king also rejoiced greatly.” Later on, in chapter 29, David declares, “I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity. All these things I have given willingly and with honest intent. And now I have seen with joy how willingly your people who are here have given to you.” (v. 17)

Even as I read these words, I want to express my own joy as your pastor. I want to make sure to say, “thank you” to those of you who are practicing generous giving to God at our church. Because of our confidential giving practices, I don’t know specifically who gives to our church, but I want to publicly say “thank you.” Thank you, not just for giving, but also for setting an example of spiritual maturity and devotion to Christ. Thank you for loving God and His church. For financially supporting the gospel-centered ministries here in Bemidji and around the world. Currently, our church is pretty healthy financially. In fact, just last week, we had one of our most generous offerings of the year. You can see our current giving numbers listed on the back page of our bulletin every week. We try to be as transparent as we can with our church budget and how we spend each dollar. These records are fully available. If you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to contact our Trustee Board.²⁰ I do want to let you know that recently our Trustees have noticed a mildly concerning trend. Our number of giving units is down a bit from the previous year. The term “giving unit” sounds bit odd but it’s a good way of confidentially measuring how broad the financial support is for our ministries. Currently, there are about 200 individuals and families who consistently support our ministries at Efree Bemidji. But that number has dropped by 4 units over the past year; that’s about a 2% decrease. Obviously,

¹⁷ Stott on Stewardship: Ten Principles on Christian Giving, Generous Giving, Inc., Chattanooga, TN, 2003, p. 13

¹⁸ Another good reason to consistently tithe at least 10% is that it gets us in the good habit of regularly putting money in its proper place. The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. We cannot serve both God and money. Money should be FAR from 1st place in our lives. A brief personal review of our spending habits will reveal what our hearts treasure. One of the best ways to make sure that money hasn’t become our god is by giving it back to God for His purposes. The Rich Young Ruler made the sad choice of walking away from Jesus when asked to part with his money. See Matthew 6:19-24, 19:16-22 and 1 Timothy 6:6-10.

¹⁹ As we strive toward developing a generous heart, let’s agree on 3 things:

1. Giving to God is a cheerful expression of worship. 2 Corinthians 9:7 says that, “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.”
2. Giving to God is a joyous privilege. 2 Corinthians 8:1-4 says, “And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people.”
3. Giving to God comes with contentment. 1 Timothy 6:6-7 tells us, “But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.” As we grow in spiritual maturity, we learn to be content with not spending all of our money on ourselves. We discover a deep satisfaction in being generous. In the words of Jesus, we learn that, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Acts 20:35)

²⁰ Read 2 Corinthians 8:16-24. Pastor T.D. Jakes notes that a good test of someone’s integrity is their openness to accountability.

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But I do know that God calls us to honor Him with our giving and to support the ministry of this local church with our shared finances. We are approaching our church's 100-year anniversary in the year 2024. Strong, steady financial giving will be one of the things that keeps the lights on and our church doors open.²³ And not just open, but thriving for His Kingdom purposes. So, without apology, I urge you to join us in this privilege of supporting God's work. May we take to heart the words of 2 Corinthians 8:7, "But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving." We serve a VERY generous God; let's become more and more like Him. Let's grow in this grace of giving. Giving to God financially is an intrinsic part of "becoming fully devoted followers of Jesus together." So let's increase in spiritual maturity, to the point where Giving to God First, becomes a natural overflow of our faith.

*This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on November 17, 2019 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson*

Ways to Give at Efree Bemidji

- 1. Giving Envelopes:** Use one of the white giving envelopes at church to give with cash or check. Use the various lines to designate toward General Ministry Fund, Global Partners Fund (missions), Benevolence, Debt Reduction, Building Fund, etc.
- 2. Electronic Giving:** Go to the church's website, www.efcbemidji.org/give and click on the GIVE ONLINE button. Create your online profile and choose whether to give a one-time gift or to set up a recurring donation. There are options to designate which fund(s) you want your donation to go towards.
- 3. Giving by Text:** Simply send a text to (218) 216-8560 with the amount you would like to contribute. Make sure to include the dollar sign before the amount (example: \$25). Within a few minutes, you'll be sent a return text with a link to register. Click on the link and enter your cardholder name and credit or debit card information. Once your registration is complete, you will receive a text verification and a receipt via email. For future giving, simply send a text with the amount you wish to give, and it will process automatically.
- 4. Paper Form for Giving by Bank:** Request an authorization form for bank contributions at the church office. Complete the information for making recurring gifts from your banking account, then submit it to the church office in a sealed envelope.
- 5. Mobile Giving App:** Mobile giving is easy! Just follow these steps to set up giving through your smartphone.
 1. Download the GivePlus Mobile app on Google Play (Android) or the App Store (iOS). Search for GivePlus Church to quickly find and download the app.
 2. Search by church name or by Zip Code to locate Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji.
 3. Give as a guest or set up an account.

Thank you for financially supporting God's work in and through the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji. We are very careful to steward each dollar in a way that honors God. Any questions can be directed to our Trustee Board or by emailing efree@paulbunyan.net. Your giving at Efree is

²¹ Pastor John Piper urges people "toward the tithe" since he knows that some are not yet giving, but he trusts that any believer in Christ should be on their way toward it. Listen to his excellent message on tithing at <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/toward-the-tithe-and-beyond> Also check out <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/is-tithing-commanded-for-christians> Consider also <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/should-all-of-my-tithe-go-to-the-local-church>

²² Consider 2 Corinthians 9:5 where Paul mentions finishing the arrangements for giving.

²³ I appreciate Pastor Matt Chandler's candid remark: Paying the church's light bill is not sexy, but that's what grownups do, they pay the light bill.