

“Do I Have to Tithe?”

Date: January 17, 2016

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: Stewardship series

Theme: Giving, stewardship

Texts: Leviticus 27:30-34; 2 Corinthians 8:8-15; 9:6-7

The year was 1977; I had just graduated from college and landed my first full time job. I was living in West Virginia at the time and I had transferred my church membership from my home church in Baltimore, MD to First UMC in Buckhannon, WV.

There was a knock on my door and two men stood there, wanting to talk with me. They were from the stewardship committee of my new church, and they wanted to discuss my financial gift to the church in the coming year.

It was different back then. Some of you are old enough to remember the old stewardship campaigns offered by the Methodist Church – Pony Express, Circuit Rider. People would go out from the church in two's to talk to every church member. They would explain the church budget and then ask you to make a faith commitment, or pledge, as to what you would give in the coming year.

I resented those two fellows sitting in my humble bachelor's apartment. I was only making about \$173 a week, before taxes. I didn't think I could afford to give much of anything. And they were talking to me about the biblical notion of tithing.

Wow! As a young man of 22 years old, I couldn't begin to fathom giving the church 10% of my income. What would I have to live on? (Do the math: I still had 90% left!) The point is, my spiritual maturity was not at a place where I could even dream about giving that much money away. And I resented them implying I should.

Too often the church has used guilt as the primary motivator for encouraging people to give. I've actually heard a Finance Chairperson say this, "If more people don't give more money, then the lights may not stay on." On cue, an usher turned the lights out for dramatic effect. "Please, won't you give more to keep the lights on?"

What a joy to be able to give this sermon today from the position of having enough money for the church to do its mission and ministry without making threats like that. We are not desperate for money here at Lakewood.

I am so thankful for the generous giving of Lakewoodians. We paid our apportionments in full last year. We paid our utilities and payroll. AND we were able to give generously to missions beyond this local church. AND we were able to help people, both in our own church family and in the community.

So why do a stewardship sermon if people are already giving generously? Why? - because giving is a spiritual discipline. We have a spiritual need to give. I would be remiss as your pastor if I didn't encourage you to grow in this area of your discipleship.

In addition to that, not everyone has made that leap of faith to be a generous giver. Many people are still at that place where I was as a young man fresh out of college – cynically viewing the church as a greedy institution trying to get its hands into my back pocket.

But if you need another reason for this sermon, it's because even the generous givers need to be given the opportunity to give a little more. You see, if we're not growing, then we're going backwards. Giving generously helps us to grow into the likeness of God who gives extravagantly more than we need or deserve.

“Well, pastor, just how much do you expect us to be giving?”

I'm glad you asked me that question, because the Bible has a lot to say about the use of money in a person's life. The concept of tithing is an Old Testament idea that originated on Mount Sinai with Moses receiving the Law from God.

Tithing is the biblical ideal. For many people it is Law; they understand it as what God expects from them: Ten percent of the first fruit of our labors. Ten percent of the livestock, ten percent of the harvest, ten percent of the paycheck: It all belongs to God anyway, and this represents our gift to God.

“But, are United Methodists required to tithe?” I like what Paul had to say to the people of Corinth in today's 2nd lesson: “I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love.” (2 Cor. 8:8) In our church, no one checks your giving record and compares it to your W-2 or 1099 form to see if you're tithing. Your gift to the church is between you and God.

After Barb and I got married, and I entered seminary, I felt God tugging on my heart in this area our life. After some conversation, we decided that we would begin to give a percentage of our income, with the goal of eventually tithing. After several years we reached that goal of tithing our income. And we've been doing so ever since.

What I've discovered, and those who have taken the challenge to tithe have discovered, is that it's really a matter of trust. Do I trust God enough to do what He asks? Do I trust God enough to give *this much money* to the Lord's work, and trust that He will provide for the rest of my needs? Giving to the church is a spiritual matter before it is a financial matter. Do I trust God?

We give because God expects us to give. I think it's wrong to motivate people by telling them "we need your money." As followers of Christ, we are better motivated because of our gratitude to God. We give back to God what is already God's, so that through our gifts the love of God can become tangible in the world.

"So, what did Jesus think about the tithe?" Well, in his time the tithe was a given. But Jesus stressed that giving was about the condition of the heart. "God desires a cheerful giver," says Paul. Both Jesus and Paul stressed that giving should be something we desire, and not something we feel obligated to do.

Getting into a right relationship with God is a matter of the inner heart, not the outward actions. When we're right with God in our hearts, the actions will flow easily, joyfully, gratefully.

So, the sermon title, *"Do I have to tithe?"* That's between you and God. The biblical pattern of tithing is giving the first 10 % of your income to God as a practical discipline for spiritual growth. However, some people begin with a smaller percentage and grow into the tithe.

And those who are already giving 10% often feel God calling them to give beyond the tithe, as their faith and discipleship continue to grow. Everyone is challenged to take the next step in giving. (Invite the ushers to pass out the "Weekly Giving Chart," handout)

"Should my tithe be based on my gross income or my net income after taxes?" Good question. Again, everyone must seek God's direction in his or her giving decisions. Traditional interpretations indicate the biblical tithe represents the first fruits of our income. Giving before the taxes are taken out honors the

principle that God owns everything, and we can joyfully trust that God will allow us to live the abundant life on the other 90 percent.

“Are United Methodists expected to tithe?” If we say that we are a people who allow the Bible to guide our lives, the answer would be “yes.” However, no one is going to tell anyone else what they have to give. The expectation of our membership vow is that we will share in the financial support of the church’s ministry.

It delights me to know, there are in this congregation people who are giving sacrificially, people who are living on fixed incomes who are tithing, and even giving more.

It grieves me to know, there are some in this congregation who have a combined family income of over six figures who do not contribute a penny to the church’s ministry. Let those who have ears hear.

“Is our salvation determined by the level of our giving?” Absolutely not. We are saved by God’s grace. Salvation is a free gift accepted by faith. But living into that salvation, what we call the path of discipleship, includes learning how to give so that our whole life is shaped and formed by God’s grace, including our finances.

“If I don’t tithe, am I still welcome here at Lakewood UMC?” Absolutely. Tithing is a personal, spiritual discipline. We welcome everyone who comes to experience God’s love in Christ, regardless of how much they place in the offering plate, or direct deposit electronically. All are welcome. May God guide us in our next step.

Let us now pray the opening prayer found in the bulletin.

Much of today’s sermon borrowed heavily from *A Disciple’s Path: Deepening Your Relationship With Christ and the Church*, by James Harnish with Justin Larosa. Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2012. p. 69-70.