

## Do I Have to Tithe?

Date: November 10, 2019

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: Extravagant generosity, sermon series

Theme: Tithing, giving, stewardship

Text: Malachi 3:8-12; 2 Corinthians 9:6-11

How do you *feel* when you hear the word *tithe*? Joyful and excited? Resentful and angry? Maybe a little put-off? What do you *think* when you hear the word *tithe*? Is it just a word the church uses to manipulate people into giving more money? Or, is it biblical and something I should consider?

The Old Testament talks frequently about the tithe – the first ten percent of one’s earnings, harvest or other resources. The Hebrew people were to give a tithe to God, and they were to do it with gratitude.

Numbers 18:21 tells us the people paid a general tithe to the Levites. Numbers 18:25-31 tells us the Levites paid a portion of the general tithe to the priest who served at the Temple. In Deuteronomy 14:22-27 we learn the people kept a tithe to pay for their annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and in verse 28-29 we are told the people paid a tithe for the poor, the orphans and the widows. Let me explain that.

The Levites were one of the 12 tribes of Israel. The Levites worked for the nation of Israel and in return for their work they received 10 percent from the rest of the population. All of the priests in the Temple were Levites, but we should note that not all of the Levites were priests.

The priests took care of all the responsibilities associated with the Temple. If possible, all people were to take an annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem and provide a tithe at that time. And every three years, the Israelites gave a tithe for the poor, the orphans and the widows.

Tithing is a biblical principle. You’ll hear me mention it whenever we call for the morning offering. You and I give to the church because of our

gratitude to the Lord. We give back to God what is already God's, so that through our gifts the love of God can become a tangible reality in our world. This time of giving in worship is a reminder of the blessings God gives us and gave to us through Jesus Christ.

So, what did Jesus think about the tithe? Jesus probably didn't have to teach people to tithe; they were already doing it. It was a given. However, Jesus stressed that giving was about the condition of the heart, giving out of gratitude and not out of obligation or fulfilling a legalistic requirement.

We respond to the abundance of God in form of our prayers, our presence in worship together, our service, our witness, AND our financial gifts which support the church. We respond to what God has done for us with our whole lives – our time, resources and attention – all directed to God. God blesses us. We say thanks with our heart, mind, soul and body – that is to say our whole selves, which includes our financial resources.

Well, you might ask, **“How much am I really expected to give?”** Let me tell you – that's between you and God. The biblical pattern of tithing is giving the first 10 percent of your income, as a practical discipline to help us grow spiritually.

Most people begin with a smaller percentage and grow into the tithe. I know I did. When I was first approached by the stewardship team, which came to my apartment in Buckhannon, WV, asking me how much I planned to pledge to the church that year, I was angry. I didn't want to be held accountable. I had just gotten out of college. I had just gotten my first full time job. And here were these two guys asking me to pledge to give away a percentage of my income. I didn't want to do that.

It took me several years, a marriage, and little bit more stability in my

finances to finally reach the goal of tithing. But we did it. And it is such a blessing. For some people, they are already giving the tithe, and they feel called to give beyond the tithe, and do so. The tithe, ten percent, is the goal. Each of us is challenged to take the next step in giving.

**“But pastor, should the tithe be based on my gross income, or my net income after taxes?”** Again, each of us must seek God’s direction in his or her giving decisions. Traditional interpretations indicate the biblical tithe represented the first fruits of our income.

By giving before the costs of housing, transportation, taxes and other expenses, we honor the principle that God owns everything. And we can joyfully trust God to allow us to live fully on the other 90 percent. But each person, each couple, each family must decide on their own. No one is checking your 1099 or W-2 forms to verify.

**“Are we expected to tithe, here at Lakewood United Methodist?”** Well, let me say this – the biblical principle of offering 10 percent of our income to God is a valuable spiritual discipline. If we honor God in this way, it will make a big difference in our lives. But we do not require people to tithe. It is an individual decision that you work out with God. *We do* expect everyone to do their part to share in the financial support of our ministry.

Here’s a question someone might ask: **“Is my salvation determined by the level of my giving?”** The short answer is “No!” We are saved by God’s grace. But living into that salvation – what we call the discipleship path – includes learning how to use the gifts that God gives us, so that our whole life is shaped and formed around our salvation. We grow in our understanding of how our gifts can be used as part of God’s work of salvation in the world.

**“But pastor, if I don’t tithe, am I still welcome in this church?”**

Absolutely! Tithing is a personal decision, a part of your spiritual discipline. The UMC welcomes everyone who comes to experience God’s love in Christ, regardless of where he or she is on the spiritual journey, including their spiritual discipline of giving.

At this time, I’d like to ask if there are any persons here who have made the decision to tithe, and who would be willing to share a brief testimony about what that has meant to you in your spiritual growth and your walk with Christ? Anyone?

(After the testimonies, or if there are none) Let us return to the front of our bulletins and pray together the prayer that is printed:

“Lord, giver of all things, I recognize and praise you for your creation. Thank you for the abilities, talents, resources and life that you have created in and through me. May I be grateful and have wisdom to know how to be a good steward of those resources. Give me wisdom and direction related to tithing. May I know the knowledge of your will and have the power to carry it out. Amen.”

This sermon borrows heavily from the workbook *“A Disciple’s Path: Deepening Your Relationship with Christ and the Church,”* by James Harnish and Justin Larosa, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012, pp. 69-70.