

**“The Real Reason to Give” / Matthew 5:17-18; 23:1-3
November 17, 2019**

Before we begin, take your bulletin and read with me the two verses:

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

"So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all the Lord has commanded you to say" (Acts 10:33b)

Today is an important day in the life of this church. As important as it is, today's topic is one that every pastor would rather not talk about – but as the verse from Acts implies, God has commanded me to say certain things. Today is Stewardship Sunday, the one Sunday per year I speak about money; today's message is also known in some circles as the “Sermon on the Amount.”

Some might complain if a sermon is about money, but Jesus actually spoke more about money than he did about love. If I were to talk about money as often as Jesus did, you would hear thirteen sermons each year on Stewardship.

We speak lovingly about Life in Christ, but life in Christ also includes our financial response to his

- Birth,
- Life,
- Death,
- And resurrection.

God has commanded me to tell you this: If you are not tithing, your life in Christ is incomplete; you are operating with one hand behind your back; your response to God's love and grace is one of:

- Hesitation,
- Conditionality,
- Reluctance,
- And partiality.

Of course, scripture has much to say about stewardship:

- Everything belongs to God;
- Everything comes from God;
- Everything we have is God's;
- Everything is given lovingly, generously, and is underserved.

We should give back to God as lovingly and generously as he gives to us.

In the Old Testament, we are told, actually commanded:

- A tenth of everything, off the top, first fruits, goes to God;
- Our tithe should go to our local congregation;
- We are to give joyfully, as at a festival.

In the Old Testament, everyone was under the authority of the law. But because of Christ, we are now under grace. Under the law, the tithe was required. The tithe was part of the culture, something everyone was expected to do. Under grace, because of the work of Christ, the tithe becomes a joyous and loving *response* to that grace.

If you read the New Testament, Jesus actually says very little about tithing. Was the tithe no longer required? Were the Old Testament rules no longer relevant? Was the law suddenly unimportant?

Listen to what he says about that, Matthew 5:17-18: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

Many of you are familiar with these words from the Sermon on the Mount. In the verses that follow, Jesus refers to a particular aspect of the law, then he says, "But I say to you..." Whatever the law might say, Jesus was demanding a higher level of obedience.

Jesus was and is the completion, the confirmation, the fulfillment of the law; we are still under the authority of the law; the law is in effect, as Jesus says, until heaven and earth pass away.

In other words, the command to tithe remains.

Our second reading is also from Matthew's Gospel, chapter 23. Jesus is in the Temple, during what we now call Holy Week. He had his triumphal entry, and has cleansed the temple; the religious leaders question his authority; he tells some parables about authority, obedience, and judgment.

23:1-3: Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.

Jesus acknowledges the authority of the leaders – they sit on Moses' seat. The so-called "Moses seat" was what we today call "Apostolic succession." The scribes and Pharisees had authority, and were to be obeyed. Jesus respected that authority, but he often disagreed with their actions.

"But do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach." Jesus was NOT telling his listeners to stop tithing – he was instructing them (and us!) how to tithe. The Pharisees taught and observed the tithe, but not in the correct way.

Under the law, Jews were required to tithe from their garden: mint, dill, cumin, corn, oil, and wine. But in the case of the religious leaders, THEIR tithing had become ostentatious. The religious leaders were focusing on what others saw or thought of them, instead of the real reason behind the tithe.

Of course, things never change – this sort of thing still happens.

“I write my check each month, and I give the ten percent! That’s enough, isn’t it? And as a matter of fact, I hope THEY appreciate it!”

Do you view your giving as a huge favor to the church? More than once, a member has said to me, “I’ve given a lot of money to this church!”

Years ago, I was speaking to woman who was a member of a multi-staff church. Her husband was in the hospital, and she remarked, “All the money I’ve given to that church, and they send the Associate to visit my husband!”

My friends, entering that check into your check register is not checking a box in your salvation tally. That check, whatever the amount, should be a loving statement of faith in response to God’s grace.

Look at it this way: if an Old Testament person, living under the law, never knowing the grace of a risen Savior...

TITHED...

How much more generously should WE respond, given the fact that WE live in the light of the risen Christ?

Let’s look at things from the other side – what about reasons (really excuses) NOT to tithe?

We already covered the first excuse: the Old Testament is no longer in effect; we are forgiven no matter what, so we can give whatever we want.

Jesus just told us – we are still under the law, and the law commands us to tithe.

Here’s another excuse: Jesus never says anything about tithing, so we don’t have to tithe. This is called “arguing from silence.”

Let me assure you, Jesus was a tither. It would have been scandalous if he did not tithe. Jesus was an obedient Jew, and obedient Jews tithed. No self-respecting Pharisee would have invited him into his home if he were not a tither.

No matter what we might think or say, God commands us to give 10% of our income back to God. By the way, that’s 10% off the top, not after taxes. I read a good response to this once – do you want gross salvation, or net salvation?

How about ignorance – maybe you didn’t know this was God’s law. This is quite possible – I preached tithing years ago, and a woman came up to me afterwards and said, “I am sixty-eight years old, and I have been a member of this church since I was sixteen, and this is the first time tithing has been explained to me.” Turns out the pastor thought money was too controversial.

Are you like that woman? Didn’t know before? That’s OK – God is gracious and forgiving – but like it or not, now you know. Be convicted and start your journey to a tithe.

What about debt? Not tithing because of debt? Or are you in debt because you have not put God and Christ at the center of your financial life? Speaking personally and professionally, a person will manage things much more closely when the first 10% goes to God!

Fixed income? Too poor? God is not interested in how much we give. Again, he does command us to give a tenth, but he is much more concerned about our attitude towards giving.

Mark 12:41-43: [Jesus] sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

A convicting and rather uncomfortable question for all of us: do we give out of our abundance or our poverty?

One last excuse – this has been mentioned more times than I can remember. What about giving time? Over the years, I have read at least half a dozen books on stewardship – sorry, it's not there. Thanks very much for all the time you give to this great church, but it's no substitute for tithing. I cannot find it in Scripture either – and I challenge anyone to find it. Even if you are giving a tenth of your time, seventeen, hours per week, it is no substitute for a tenth of your income.

So maybe today you've been convicted. Maybe God's word preached by me has made you a bit uncomfortable. Maybe God is telling you to begin tithing.

So how do you get there?

Maybe you can afford to begin next Sunday. If not, do the math and increase your giving each year until you reach the tithe.

And a brief word to those who are tithers – maybe God is calling you (US!) to give more!

This sermon is about money, but it's not about the money. It is not about "stepping up." It's not about meeting a budget, nor is it a referendum on that budget. It's not a warning, "If you don't increase your giving, we may have to..."

It is not about your opinion of worship, or our leaders, or the presbytery, or the denomination, or our history, or me.

It is about your life in Christ, your relationship with Christ, and about your full and complete response to the grace of Christ.

Nothing would please me more if, in God's timing, everyone experienced the joy of tithing.

God loves you, and wants you to be in FULL COMMUNION AND RELATIONSHIP with him.

Did Jesus hold anything back? No, he willingly and lovingly gave his life for us: **John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”**

Just like I told the kids – one-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight-nine... One for you.

Eternal life!

Can you give back a tenth?

I mean, we get to keep nine!

Or are you living out your faith with one hand behind your back?

Give God the tenth he commands.

Give God the tenth in response to the grace of Christ.

Give God the tenth, and experience the joy his Son so wants for us.