

CORONARY CHRISTIANITY - WHY AND HOW WE GIVE TO THE LORD - Part Two

Sunday, May 30th, 10:00 a.m. - Teaching #1374

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WHY DIDN'T PAUL TALK ABOUT TITHING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT?

We need to look at the *reasons* people frequently give for *not* seeing the importance or relevance of *tithing* today. And the most common objection I still hear about tithing is that it is somehow an Old Testament regulation. It is for people who are under the law, and that's not where we are in the New Testament church. Then, usually, there comes this question: "Why do you still talk about this tithe - this 10% giving code - when the New Testament says nothing about it?"

Of course, the question is mistaken right off the bat, but it's close enough to make a point. Actually, the New Testament mentions tithing *three times*. It's mentioned in **Matthew 23:23 (Luke 11:42)**, **Luke 18:9-14** and **Hebrews 7:4-12**.

But, having said that, it *is* true that Paul and the other apostles don't mention tithing in the instruction they give to believers about their gifts to the Lord's work. I have a growing conviction about the reason for their silence. And I have come to see that the reason for their silence about tithing has profound implications for the church today. And the reason *isn't* that tithing is an Old Testament religious exercise that has no meaning for Christians because we are not under the law. I think that's a defective line of reasoning that misses not only the *New* Testament teaching on tithing, but the *Old Testament* teaching as well.

1) **A QUICK OVERVIEW OF THE OLD TESTAMENT TEXTS ON TITHING**

- a) **Genesis 14:17-20** - "After his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). [18] And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.) [19] And he blessed him and said, 'Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; [20] and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!' And Abram gave him a tenth of everything."

This account has nothing to do with the Old Testament law. This account takes place *half a millennium* before Moses and the giving of the law. This is the story of Abraham (still called Abram) pursuing a king named Chedorlaomer to rescue Lot who had been captured. With 300 men Abraham defeats Chedorlaomer and saves Lot and recovers all of the stolen goods from Sodom. On the way home a priest of God named Melchizedek pronounces a blessing on Abraham and Abraham offers Melchizedek a tenth of all the possessions he has just recovered.

Again, there was no law *telling* Abraham to do this. And the tithe isn't paid as some sort of payment to God to stir Him to help Abraham. Abraham, the giver, is *responding* to God for providing for him and giving him the victory over his enemies. Abraham's tithe is a *response* of *gratitude*, not a *duty* of *commandment*. The Holy Spirit records this first instance of the tithe to lay its proper foundation in the rest of the Scriptures.

So lesson number one from the Old Testament is *tithing is based on gratitude, not law*.

- b) **Genesis 28:18-22** - "So early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. [19] He called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first. [20] Then Jacob made a vow, saying, 'If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, [21] so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, [22] and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you.'"

This is the second mention of tithing in the Scriptures. Abraham's grandson, Jacob, has a marvelous dream in which God promised to be with him and bless him with land and descendants. Jacob responds to God's wonderful promise with the declaration that he will give God a tenth (a tithe) of all that God gives him.

Notice the exact content of Jacob's words. In offering God the tenth he is **not** saying "**Ninety percent of everything is mine, and ten percent is yours.**" His words are very clear. It is precisely because he knows **everything** he receives is God's that he will gladly give Him the tithe, or tenth. Or, to say it a bit differently, giving the tenth was a way of saying Jacob would honor God with the ninety percent that was left to his own discretionary use.

Lesson number two from the Old Testament Scriptures on tithing is **it is a practical reminder that all we have is God's and received from His gracious hand.**

c) **Leviticus 27:30-33, Deuteronomy 14:22-29, Numbers 18:21-24, and 2 Chronicles 31:14-18**

These passages all refer to the time of the law, beginning with Moses, when the practice of tithing was made part of the system that governed the people of Israel. Please note, this is **not** the **beginning of the tithe** in the Old Testament. It is the period when Israel **adopted an existing practice as part of their national life.**

The passages in Numbers and 2 Chronicles deal with the payment of the tithe as a means of sustaining the Levitical priesthood and the operations of the temple. But the Deuteronomy passage makes very plain **two other primary functions of the tithe**, even within the scope of the law and national life of Israel:

Deuteronomy 14:22-27 - "You shall tithe all the yield of your seed that comes from the field year by year. [23] And before the Lord your God, in the place that he will choose, to make his name dwell there, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, of your wine, and of your oil, and the firstborn of your herd and flock, that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always. [24] And if the way is too long for you, so that you are not able to carry the tithe, when the Lord your God blesses you, because the place is too far from you, which the Lord your God chooses, to set his name there, [25] then you shall turn it into money and bind up the money in your hand and go to the place that the Lord your God chooses [26] and spend the money for whatever you desire—oxen or sheep or wine or strong drink, whatever your appetite craves. And you shall eat there before the Lord your God and rejoice, you and your household. [27] And you shall not neglect the Levite who is within your towns, for he has no portion or inheritance with you."

Verse 23 is the important verse here - "And before the Lord your God, in the place that he will choose, to make his name dwell there, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, of your wine, and of your oil, and the firstborn of your herd and flock, **that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always.**"

In addition to, and perhaps primary to, the importance of the tithe as a means of support for the priesthood, the people were to take their tithe, either in goods or exchanged to cash, and then exchanged back to goods, to the place where God would put His name - which was to become Jerusalem. They were to eat a portion of the tithe in the presence of the Lord and celebrate by "**rejoicing with their household**"(26). This was to be a celebration of the goodness of the Lord to them and their household.

Then, the **ultimate** purpose of the tithe is made clear in the last part of **verse 23** - "**....that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always.**" In other words, the tithe was given as a gracious provision - even to the people of Israel - to help them learn that keeping God first in **financial commitments** would help keep God first in **all commitments**. God told the people the tithe was a tool to teach them the fear of the Lord. By tithing they would learn to fear the Lord "**always**"(23).

This is strikingly like what we saw in the creation account last week. Just as the **love of money** is the **root** of all evil, so **obedience with the tithe** is the **root** of much righteousness and fruitfulness unto the Lord. Israel **learned** to fear the Lord in **all** areas by obeying God in **this particular** area. And Adam and Eve **lost** dominion in the **whole** of the garden when they disobeyed God with a **portion** of it. This is why the prophet Malachi tells the people to **begin** their return to the Lord by bringing the whole tithe into His house. There is a repeated pattern of thought here on the importance of the tithe.

Now we're getting ready to answer our opening question about why Paul didn't teach the church about tithing in the New Testament. We **weren't** ready to answer that question until we understood the heart and practice of tithing in the **Old** Testament. Most people write tithing off **out of hand** by stating, as though it were just an obvious, assumed truth, that tithing is merely rooted in Old Testament law. Then, **after** that

assumption, the rest of the argument runs very smoothly. Tithing is law. We aren't under law. Therefore - very simple - tithing isn't for New Testament Christians.

But this is bad hermeneutics. The argument is simplistic and goes far too quickly and carelessly. Tithing **doesn't** have its origins in the law of Moses in the Old Testament. And tithing, even under the practice of the nation Israel, never was just a means of supporting the priesthood and the sacrificial system that was fulfilled in Christ. Right from the beginning it was designed by a loving Creator to do far more than that. That's where our study has come so far.

2) SO, WHY DOESN'T PAUL TALK ABOUT TITHING TO THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH?

To get the proper answer to this question is to come to understand the very **heart and soul** of Christian stewardship. We'll go quickly as we wrap up, but don't miss the importance of these closing points:

- a) **First, the apostolic silence on tithing is not because Jesus abolished the tithe.** We need to be honest enough to recognize that, while not much is said about tithing in the New Testament (for reasons we're coming to), there is **no** Scriptural statement from Jesus abolishing the practice of tithing.

Luke 11:37-44 - "While Jesus was speaking, a Pharisee asked him to dine with him, so he went in and reclined at table. [38] The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner. [39] And the Lord said to him, "Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. [40] You fools! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also? [41] But give as alms those things that are within, and behold, everything is clean for you. [42] "But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. [43] Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces. [44] Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it."

There were certainly parts of the ceremonial law of Israel that Jesus saw passing away. He openly disregarded them. That, in fact, is how this whole passage starts. Jesus ignored the rules of ceremonial washing before He ate and this infuriated the Pharisees. But Jesus **didn't** ignore the practice of the tithe. What He disapproved of was the **hypocrisy** of these people who **used** the tithe as a religious mask to hide **injustice, cruelty and a chronic lack of true devotion to God**. Tithing didn't make people holy all by itself. And Jesus hated the **abuse** of the tithe He saw taking place.

So what's the answer Jesus gives? Quit tithing? No, nothing of the kind. **Verse 42** - "**But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.**" Underline it. Jesus says "**Don't neglect the tithe.**"

"But Pastor Don, Jesus only said that to the Pharisees because He was addressing them as people under the law!"

Are you sure? Then why did He ignore the ceremonial washing before He ate? He certainly **wasn't** pushing them to keep **that** part of the law. In fact, over and over again Jesus was criticized for His open disregard for their fastidious law-keeping. He broke the Sabbath. He and His disciples picked and ate grain they weren't supposed to touch. He associated with people with whom He wasn't supposed to associate. He touched lepers.

But He **did** encourage this crowd to keep tithing. Jesus saw something precious in the tithe. He knew His Old Testament Scriptures. He knew the gracious provision of the tithe and hated seeing it used by the Pharisees as a legal loophole to cling to an unchanged heart. But He **never** said one word about abolishing the practice of tithing.

- b) **Tithing is not mentioned by the apostles in their teaching to the church because it is only foundational. It is never the goal of our giving.**

Tithing is the **floor**. The New Testament writers weren't relaying the floor. They were raising the **ceiling**. Given the reality of the manifestation of God's love in the Cross, the vitality of the radical new resurrection life in Christ Jesus, the inner motivation of the Holy Spirit, and the love of God that is now shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, the issue of the New Testament is never presented as, "**Are you giving your 10%?**," but, "**Can you justify spending 90% of your income on yourself?**"

But here is the important point. This is **not** the **abolishment of the tithe**. It is simply the **raising of the bar**. Tithing, by its very nature is **limiting**. A tithe is 10%. It, by definition, can never be more. The issue of tithing is a **minimum limit**. The issue of grace is **unleashing maximum liberality**. The command to tithe is simply **inadequate to suit this approach. Grace never lowers the floor. It always raises the ceiling.**

- c) ***Tithing is not the focus of the early church because, while foundational, it is inadequate for the assignment of the great commission.***

The difference between giving in the Old Testament and giving in the New is not adequately explained by the difference between **law** and **non-law**. The big difference for giving in the New Testament church is the **great commission**. By and large, the Old Testament people of God were **not** a missionary people. The entire plot of earth covered by the Old Testament story is unbelievably small.

The church, on the other hand, has been assigned the gigantic task of taking the message and life of Jesus Christ to every person in every corner of planet Earth. This task requires such stupendous sacrifice and investment from each of us that to measure the cost by a **fixed percentage** is ridiculously out of the question.

Hear me clearly on this point. The fundamental reason the tithe is not focused on in the New Testament is **the New Testament asks a totally different question**. In view of the shortness of time and the greatness of the commission, the question of the New Testament is never, "**How much should I give?**" The fundamental question of the New Testament is now "**How much dare I keep?**"

Grace has come. Life has come. The floor has not been lowered. The ceiling has been raised. Jesus only mentioned tithing twice - when He told the crowd **not** to neglect it - and when He told the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in the temple. On **both** occasions He condemned the **abuse** of the tithe. In **neither** case did He **abolish** the tithe. The rest of the New Testament focuses on giving, not in the light of a **minimum standard**, but in light of the **great commission**.

If you don't want to ask the tithe question, then don't. I don't care, as long as you **replace** the 10% question with the proper one. The question now is **not**, "Can I afford to tithe?." The question now is "**In the light of the vastness of grace and life I've received, and in the light of the magnitude of the assignment from Jesus in the great commission, can I justify a life-style that consumes 90% of my income?**"

Let's raise the ceiling, not lower the floor. If a law-filled tithe looks like 10%, what does a grace-filled, blood-redeemed, Christ-empowered, Spirit-led, world-reaching offering look like?

By all means, let's remember the difference between the Old Testament and the New. God give us all eyes to see this issue with grace endowed power and clarity. Help us all, Lord Jesus, to remember that giving is not measured not by what we **give**, but by what we **keep**.