

Stewardship

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[0 : 00] This is the service at Holy Trinity on the 5th of November 2000. The preacher is Paul Barker and his sermon is entitled Stewardship.

Some called him mad. The more he gave, the more he had. Those words of John Bunyan express biblical truth.

God blesses generous givers. And in the end I think there's no way around that truth. In the Old Testament the people of God were the nation of Israel.

And the law of God to them unequivocally said, You shall tithe. The word tithe literally means tenth. That is that Israel was annually to bring one tenth of all its income by way of produce, etc.

As an offering to God. In the first reading we heard in the book of Deuteronomy, part of the law of God to the people of Israel through Moses, Set apart a tithe of all the yield of your seed that is brought in yearly from the field.

[1 : 15] In the presence of the Lord your God, in the place that he will choose as a dwelling for his name, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, your wine, your oil, as well as the firstlings of your herd and flock.

That was a fixed obligation regardless of the season or year. Some years the crops would be bountiful and abundant.

Other years perhaps not so. But regardless of whether there was much or little, Israel was to offer a tenth to God.

For them their tithe or tenth was not the surplus or the leftovers. It wasn't what was left in the wallet or the purse at the end of the month or after the harvest period or whatever.

For them it was a primary and fundamental commitment of their budgeting, of their income as a giving to God. This tithe would be offered at the central place.

[2 : 16] Later in Israel's history, 400 years after Moses spoke these words, it would be the temple at Jerusalem. But in the interim period, probably there was a central sanctuary at places like Shiloh and Gilgal, and there the people would go to offer their tithe to God.

Much of that tithe was for the provision of the priests. Israel was divided into 12 tribes, and one of those tribes, the tribe of Levi or the Levites, was the priestly tribe.

They had no inherited land. When the other tribes, when the nation entered the land, they divided up the land amongst the other tribes, but the tribe of Levi did not receive a sort of tribal area of land. They would live in different towns throughout the land as well as be based at the central sanctuary. Provisions for them came not from their own land, because they had none, but rather from the tithes that were offered by the other tribes to them.

Also, part of this tithe offering was to be a festival meal, a celebration, if you like, a meal where the people would go to this central place and with the priests have some feasts to celebrate the bounty of God in the year past.

[3 : 36] It seems that from the laws all put together that as they brought their tithe, some of it would just be put in, in a sense, to the temple treasury by way of supporting the priests and their ministry, and some of it would be used as a celebration feast for the people who were there to offer the tithe.

It was in part a reflection of the goodness of God providing for them. At the end of Deuteronomy 14, just beyond what was read for us today, comes this instruction.

Every third year, you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year and store it within your towns. Now, probably what's being said here is an additional tithe.

Every year, they would make a tenth as an offering at the central place, but every third year, an additional tenth would be kept locally, stored locally in the barns or storehouses, and the purpose of that, we're told, is for the Levite, the resident alien, the orphan and the widow, that they may come

and eat their fill.

Now, the reason those people are singled out there is that they are the people who did not own land. The Levites or the priests, as I've mentioned already, but resident aliens or sojourners, that is people from other countries who've settled in the land, they would not be allowed to own land.

[5 : 04] The widows and the orphans would not own land either. So here is a provision, an additional provision, for the poor that was made. Every third year, this provision was made in the storehouse so that the people who did not own land in their local areas would have plenty to live on.

Now, there would be other provisions for them as well through their families and other laws as well. But this was part of the care for the poor. Remember, of course, that there was no social security benefit as we know it then.

This is not the only place in the Old Testament that instructs the people of God to tithe. You find laws about it in the book of Leviticus, the book of Numbers, here in Deuteronomy, later on in the laws of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Back in Genesis, we've seen in the last couple of months in the sermons that Abraham offered a tithe to a priest called Melchizedek and Jacob, after his dream, offers a tithe to God.

Later in Israel's history also, the prophets sometimes speak about tithes. For example, the prophet Amos castigates the people of Israel for their lack of offering tithes and their lack of morality that accompanies what tithes they do offer.

[6 : 24] And the last of the prophets, the prophet Malachi, the last part of the Old Testament, he also, as we'll see shortly, castigates the people in no uncertain terms for their stinginess in not offering tithes to God.

Putting all that together, tithing was part and parcel of the way the people of God were to relate to God by offering him tithes each year, at least as a minimum.

Because we know that they also had to offer the firstlings of their flocks and herds and there were other gifts and sacrifices that they would have had to make from time to time.

The 10% is a basic level, so to speak. There are four principles undergirding this that I want to elaborate on. The first principle is that God is a generous giver.

The book of Deuteronomy in particular makes that clear. God provides abundantly all that his people will need. He's about to, in this book, bring them into a land flowing with milk and honey and there will be rain in its season, etc.

[7 : 36] All good things come from God. The people's wealth comes from God. It's not their own skill and ability so much to procure wealth, but it's God who gives them that skill and ability in the first place as well.

So the laws about tithing come in the context of, in effect, offering back to God who himself is a generous giver and has provided all this produce and these crops and these herds and flocks and so on.

Ultimately, all we have is God's provision anyway. Belongs to God. And so the first principle here is that God is a generous giver and tithing is a way of acknowledging God's own generosity in giving to us.

The second principle is that tithing provides for ministry. So we've seen that this annual tithe taken to the central shrine was there by way of supporting the Levitical priests in their ministry, setting them apart.

They did not have land. They could not sustain their own income by land, etc. They relied upon the tithes and offerings of the rest of the people of God. Now, though Christian ministry is much different from Old Testament ministry, it's not my daily practice to come up here and kill an animal, for example.

[8 : 58] And there are various other rituals and requirements of Old Testament priests. The principle of providing for ministry is one that is also clear in the New Testament. Read, for example, Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, chapters 8 and 9.

Giving by Christians is obligatory for the sustaining of Christian ministry and mission, for the support of the work of the gospel in the local place and beyond. Same principle, in effect, applies, even though the work of the priests in the Old Testament is very different from the work of New Testament ministers and ministers today.

But the principle of giving to support Christian ministry and mission is an obligation of all Christians still today. The third principle is one that's less obvious, perhaps.

tithing develops faith. In verse 23 in the passage in Deuteronomy, we read that Israel is to offer their tithes so that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always.

How is it that offering a tithe can teach us to fear God? What's it about? Well, as I said, tithing is not giving out of our surplus, what's left over, what's the sort of spare coins or notes that we happen to find in our wallet at the end of a month.

[10:27] But rather, tithing is giving of a tenth, regardless of our prosperity, in good seasons and in bad seasons. No doubt there were some seasons where Israelites would have had such an abundance of crops and animals that it would be easy for them to give a tenth of that.

But there were other seasons where if the rains had failed or blight or mildew had occurred, there would be perhaps a real struggle to give a tenth and sort of sustain yourself on the 90% that's left. The point is that offering a tithe, regardless of prosperity, teaches one to trust God that he will provide for all that is needed.

It's the same with the offering of the firstlings of the flock or the herd. Notice that it's not offering the tenth animal, it's offering the first animal. Imagine your flocks, some of them are pregnant and along comes the first lamb or calf.

That is the one to be offered to God. So you go and make it as an offering to God. You are trusting that the other pregnant cows or sheep will give birth safely and healthily to other little calves or lambs.

[11:45] But you don't necessarily wait for there to be a whole flock of little lambs and calves before you say, oh okay, it's safe enough for me to go and offer the first one. The first is to be offered regardless of the rest.

Therefore you see or hope you can see how you are strengthening or developing faith. you are offering the first and you are offering a tenth even in bad times when there is lack of prosperity teaching you to trust that God will provide for your needs.

That's something I think we need to learn. Sometimes we try and secure our own financial future before we are prepared to give anything to God or very much to God.

But God says the other way around. Offer me what is rightly his. Learn to trust him and fear him but he will provide for what you need as you need it and that will strengthen your faith.

I must say for me now it's quite easy for me to give a tithe. I don't have dependence and even though in some respects clergy don't get paid huge amounts it's very easy for me to give a tenth.

[13:05] I in fact give much more than that. But when I began to study theology full time I had to decide then was I going to keep on giving a tenth of my income.

I was going from a very well paid job as an actuary to being a student on rather measly and miserly diocesan student allowance.

over the last 15 years or so I've studied full time for over seven years in total. My first degree in diploma and then three years postgraduate study in England.

Through all of that time I have tithed or more the allowances or whatever income I've happened to receive. As a student it's not much and to be honest it would not always be clear that I could afford to live or pay the bills etc.

But at no time in those seven and a bit years has God ever let me down. At no time did I ever go without.

[14:15] God was faithful. But more importantly in that time of being a student when it was quite difficult to tithe it strengthened my faith in God's provision.

And I'm sure now that I have a greater trust in God's provision and I think a greater generosity than I did before I began to study when it was then easy to tithe and so on.

tithe that I think is the lesson that's being taught here in Deuteronomy 14. Tithe so that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always.

That is even when it's hard and you're not prosperous give a tenth and learn to trust that God will provide for you.

to be honest I doubt that there are more than a handful of people in our church who can't afford to tithe.

[15:22] Later in the Old Testament the prophet Malachi makes the same point but maybe more sharply even than this. Listen to his words. He rebukes the people of God for not offering their tithes in full.

He says in effect that they are robbing God. You are cursed with a curse for you are robbing God the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithe into the storehouse so that there may be food in my God's house and thus put me to the test says the Lord.

See if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. They're remarkable words. The only time in the Bible God invites us to test him or prove him is by offering tithes to him.

God is saying there you bring your full tithe to me. Test me to see if I'm faithful or not. Test me to see if I will give all you need or not.

And he's saying in effect I will. that's my personal testimony as well from when I was a student and indeed when I haven't been a student as well.

[16:45] That's a principle the Bible teaches. Tithe in the Old Testament give it to God whether you can afford it or not in a sense and test God to see if he will be faithful to you to provide for what you need.

God I think if we put this principle into practice it will mean that our giving is determined it is regular it is systematic it's not just what's left over in the plate I think it would mean that most of us ought to use giving envelopes so that it helps us to be regular in our giving we give not just on the days that we come to church but each week of the year means that we're not giving what's left over when the bills are paid it means that we are actually taking responsibility for appropriate stewardship of all our money too often I think our profligacy on spendthriftness on Monday to Saturday is a major reason why we find that we don't tithe on a Sunday well the fourth principle is that God blesses those as a result of tithing this arises out of what

I've just said but it's a slightly additional point trust God when you tithe and you will find that he will bless you as a result that's explicit at the end of Deuteronomy 14 in the offering of tithes Moses says so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake that is tithe so that God will bless you and that's what Malachi's words were in the prophet that I've just read test me he says and see if I won't open the windows of heaven and pour down upon you abundantly the riches of my blessing the result of obedient tithing is further and future blessing from God notice the sequence God first blesses and gives crops and rain and children and animals and so on as a result of God's blessing and

God's grace the people of God are to tithe and give generously and sacrificially in response and in response to that giving God himself will further abundantly bless and give to the people of God see the sequence God gives in the first place everything we give generously and obediently in response and God will further abundantly bless his people as a result of their giving now that's not an Old Testament sequence only it's found in the New Testament as well if you read again 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 I haven't got time to read that through now but I preached on it a couple of years ago we see there the same principles at work Paul says to the Corinthians give generously and obediently because of what God has already blessed you with in Christ and he says and as a result of your own generous and sacrificial giving God will further bless you in the future now that goes against all rationalist economic theory rationalist economic theory says use your money to gain more money get your money to work well maybe we can take up that language and say by giving our tithes and offerings to

God we are actually getting our money to work but God's blessing may not be quite so limited to finances anyway somebody here wrote to me I guess about a month ago anonymously they didn't have the guts to put their name to what they said accusing me of misrepresenting God and manipulating the congregation about giving generously to the church I don't think I'm guilty of that we don't have two collections at each service like the Nigerian church does maybe we should think about doing that I think the Bible is clear God blesses generous givers God looks favourably on generous givers it is an Old Testament principle and a New Testament principle and I make no apology for preaching it I do need to say though something about whether Christians should literally tithe or not clearly it's an

[21:24] Old Testament law in many places of the Old Testament it's abundantly clear that Christians should tithe it's also true that the New Testament does not command tithing of Christians though Jesus rebukes the Jewish leaders for tithing little things and not being obedient in weightier matters of the law Christians disagree about whether Christians should tithe literally or not some would say that the principle of the Old Testament still stands because Jesus did not refute it and others would say well it doesn't really stand because Jesus did not explicitly reinforce it seems to

me that those who say that Christians are not in a sense obligated to tithe which I think is in the end where I fall on this issue too often use that as an excuse for stinginess I don't think we're bound legally and literally by the Bible as Christians to give a tenth of our income to

Christian ministry and mission and so on but that is not an argument for being stingy and mean in our giving because all of the principles of tithing do still apply even if the exact percentage is no longer legal and law for us as Christians that is God still is the one who provides everything for us sadly in the western world we don't see that as obviously as ancient Israelites would have done we can go to Coles 24 hours a day seven days a week every day of the year virtually and buy anything in season or out of season and we lose the perspective that God has provided everything people in rural Australia are much more akin to seeing God providing for them because they rely so much more on the rain and the sun and so on we tend not to need to rely on that the principle that giving is to provide for ministry and mission is still one that applies in the

New Testament for us we are under obligation to support Christian ministry and mission both in our local church as well as further afield it is still the principle that giving ought to be generous and sacrificial as a means of stretching and testing our faith that principle still stands giving ought to be regular and generous that principle still stands in the New Testament giving is our Christian obligation whether or not we're cheerful we all know the line God loves a cheerful giver there it is in 2 Corinthians too often Christians use that as an excuse for not giving because they're not cheerful God doesn't expect you to only give when you come to church when you have a smile on your face he expects you to give generously and sacrificially every week week in week out whether or not you're cheerful but if you're cheerful it's an added bonus and he's extra pleased but giving is our obligation and duty and it is still a principle that God blesses generous givers but more could be said if ancient

Israel redeemed from Egypt where they were enslaved brought miraculously through the Red Sea God miraculously provided for them for 40 years in a wilderness food and water out of a rock and so on and brought them into the land of Canaan the promised land a land that was full of abundance and milk and honey if he could oblige them to give him a tenth at least that was their minimum how much more us how much more us who have been redeemed by Jesus death and resurrection redeemed from slavery to sin and promised not a geographical land flowing with milk and honey where sadly people are fighting today but an eternal and heavenly inheritance that is perfect that has everything we could ever need and far more in abundance forever if God could ask of ancient Israel a tithe how much more has he given us and thus may expect from us if Israel had reason to give 10% we have much more reason and I also think much more wealth let me sincerely challenge you to reflect on your giving of your money to God give for the sake of the gospel give for the sake of ministry and mission aim to increase perhaps your percentage of giving each year add up what percentage you've actually given tithing and then each year increase that percentage to your tithing or beyond would be my recommendation reorganize your daily spending see how profligate you are with chocolates or bananas or videos or magazines or whatever else see what things you can cut down your spending on so that you can increase your giving to God use giving envelopes to be systematic in your giving let us know if you want them and you don't currently use them give out of gratitude to God for past blessings and give testing

God for future blessings there was a church some thought it mad the more it gave the more it had or to use the words from the Bible from the book of Proverbs some give freely yet grow all the richer others withhold what is due and only suffer want a generous person will be enriched may our faithful and generous God bless us richly as we give truly madly and deeply Amen