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GIVING

Background

Christian giving from our resources (whether they are time, energies, possessions or money) is our grateful response to God's overwhelming generosity towards us, especially in his inexpressible gift of his Son to be our Saviour. Unless it is prompted by a regenerated heart of love and devotion to the Lord, it is useless to God and certainly does not earn us any merit.

The Old Testament period

On one occasion Abraham gave Melchizedek one-tenth of some goods he had acquired (see Genesis **14:20**). The detail in the description of this action in Hebrews **7:4–9** indicates that it does not amount to a precedent for tithing by people under the *Messianic covenant*.

Under the *Mosaic covenant*, one-tenth (a 'tithe') of agricultural produce 'belonged to the Lord' (see Leviticus **27:30–32**). See also Numbers **18:21, 24**; and see below for the use to which this portion was put.

Tithes were not the only goods given to the Lord (see Deuteronomy **12:4–7**). In Deuteronomy **14:22–29** we see that the people ate tithe produce along with the firstborn livestock in the presence of God. The needs of the levitical priesthood were not to be neglected. There were freewill offerings as well as prescribed sacrifices. However, in Malachi **3:8–10** we learn that neglect of the legal duty of the Jewish people under the *Mosaic covenant* in this matter was serious. In the expression 'the floodgates of heaven' we have a description of the rain which, of course, was needed for the growth of the produce and feeding of the flocks and herds.

See also Nehemiah **10:37–39; 13:10–12**; Proverbs **3:9**.

We do not find a duty to tithe being laid upon the poor who may have been landless labourers. This should caution against direct application of the tithing law of the *Mosaic covenant* to Christians today who are living in a 'better covenant' (see Hebrews **7:22**) 'founded on better promises' (Hebrews **8:6**). Note especially that there was provision for the poor to help themselves from the corners of fields and food that was not picked up during harvesting. They would not have tithed from the gleanings! Tithes were from farmers and growers who grew crops and kept livestock. (See Deuteronomy **24:19–21**.)¹ In the old covenant context, tithing was God's provision for the poor – including Levites (with no inheritance of their own) whose work was to offer sacrifices. (See Deuteronomy **14:28–29; 16:11, 14; 26:11–13**). In that setting it would have been a merciful, compassionate provision.

The New Testament

Christ exposed the Pharisaical abuse of tithing (see Matthew **23:23–25**). This formed part of a series of 'woes' Jesus uttered over people who were interested in externals but whose heart attitudes were wrong.

There is no legal obligation on Christians to give one-tenth of produce (or money income) to a Christian fellowship, church or leadership. As we note below, our responsibility under the *Messianic covenant* is considerably greater in character. In Unit 27 (*The Priesthood*) we learn that each believer is to offer himself or herself as a 'spiritual sacrifice' (Romans **12:1**). We belong to Jesus Christ. We live 'in him'. Everything believers are – and all that they have – belongs to him. The New Testament makes it clear that the levitical priesthood (for whose sustenance the legal tithes of the Law of Moses were prescribed) does not exist amongst believers in Jesus Christ. There is now a priesthood of all believers, and our great High Priest is Jesus Christ himself. Christian ministers are not like the sacrificing priests of the Old Testament. We recall that Paul the Apostle supported himself by tentmaking.

Some Christians tithe to their churches today because some church leaders teach it as though it were a legal requirement. However, there are serious dangers in teaching as a regulation what is not shown in the New Testament to be the 'Law of Christ'. Churches sometimes (wrongly) place an excessive burden on poor people. This is not to say that the poor should never give (we remember Jesus' approval of the donation by a poor woman in the account of the 'widow's mite') but to caution against legalistic burdens being placed by some Christians on others. We can find much guidance throughout the Bible concerning the special care due to the poor and needy, including many widows and orphans.

We are shown a new way in the New Testament. At Pentecost the new motive was revealed as people began to give spontaneously as they were prompted by God's grace and by love both for Christ and for their fellow believers.

The early church began to have 'all things' in common. There was real sharing and believers were providing for

each other as brothers and sisters had need (see Acts 2:44). Organised provision was then made for widows, who would have found life especially hard (see Acts 6:1). But believers still had responsibilities towards other members of their own households (see 1 Timothy 5:8).

Some even gave all they had, selling property and giving the proceeds. However, the sin of lying to the Holy Spirit was severely punished by God in the case of Ananias and Sapphira, who attempted deception about the scale of their giving (Acts 5:1–11).

Matthew 6:1–4; 10:42; 19:20–22; Luke 11:42, 18:12; Acts 2:44–46, 4:32, 34–37; 1 Corinthians 13:3

True giving flows from the activity of the Holy Spirit. The will to give generously (especially to meet the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ) arises from God's gracious work in the heart. It stems from true love for the Lord and from compassion for people in need (of whatever kind), especially our fellow believers. Where the Holy Spirit is powerfully at work there is invariably generous giving. We surrender all that we have to God in the realisation that it actually comes from him and belongs to him. We see ourselves as his stewards, privileged to be his agents of blessing. So we should seek his guidance as to how much we should give and to whom. For some this will actually be much more than ten percent of their income; for some who are destitute and unable to work, there needs to be the humility to receive gifts from others thankfully, without 'pride' getting in the way. We are all to give thanks to God, for ultimately it is he who meets all our needs, and we are all to be generous with whatever resources are at our disposal.

Dimensions of Christian Giving

Basis

<i>Honest work</i>	Ephesians 4:28
<i>Divine example</i>	2 Corinthians 8:9, 9:15
<i>Divine expectation</i>	Matthew 6:2; 1 Corinthians 16:2
<i>Divine enabling</i>	2 Corinthians 9:8–9
<i>Divine quickening –</i>	
<i>To works of grace</i>	2 Corinthians 8:6–7, 19
<i>To acts of love</i>	1 Corinthians 13:3
<i>Divine generosity</i>	1 Corinthians 4:7

Extent

<i>Every believer</i>	1 Corinthians 16:2
<i>Proportionate</i>	1 Corinthians 16:2; 2 Corinthians 8:3, 12–15

Motivation

<i>God's glory</i>	2 Corinthians 8:19; 9:11–13
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Manner

<i>Generously</i>	2 Corinthians 9:6
<i>Voluntarily</i>	2 Corinthians 8:3, 8; 9:7
<i>Cheerfully</i>	2 Corinthians 9:7
<i>Discreetly</i>	Matthew 6:1–4
<i>Sincerely</i>	Acts 5:1–11; Romans 12:8
<i>Habitually</i>	1 Corinthians 16:2

Beneficiaries

<i>Those who ask</i>	Matthew 5:42
<i>Those in need</i>	
<i>(especially believers)</i>	2 Corinthians 9:1; Galatians 6:10; James 2:15–17; 1 John 3:17
<i>Those in ministry</i>	1 Corinthians 9:14; Galatians 6:6; Philippians 4:10, 14–18; 1 Timothy 5:17–18

Rewards

<i>Divine blessing</i>	2 Corinthians 9:10–11
<i>Heavenly treasure</i>	Matthew 19:21
<i>Present happiness</i>	Acts 20:35; 2 Corinthians 9:11–12

¹ For further study, with many useful additional biblical references, the following PDF ebook is currently available for free download: Russell E. Kelly Ph.D., *Should the Church Teach Tithing?* ISBN: 978-0-595-15978-9