

# New Testament Giving

by Rev. Steve Bydeley, D.Min.

“I almost wish their knife would slip and so castrate themselves.”<sup>1</sup> That is essentially how strongly Paul felt toward those who were trying to put the Galatian Christians under the Jewish Law. This was a conflict between adherents of the Old Testament (OT) and the New Testament (NT). Our misunderstandings about giving—tithes and offerings—fall into this same conflict.

To define NT giving, we need to differentiate between its basic tenet and that of the OT. The basic tenet of the OT is relationship with God by obeying the Law, while in the NT, it is relationship by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, who fulfilled all the demands of the Law.

The conflict between these two positions came to a climax in the early years of Christianity.

Paul had great difficulty with Jews following him; they modified the gospel he taught to the churches he established. Although they likely meant well, these Jews were directing gentile Christian converts to be circumcised and to come under the Law of Moses, essentially converting them as proselytes of Judaism—something often done at that time.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves (Matthew 23:15 NASB unless otherwise noted).

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul presents his position, summarizing the situation early in the third chapter. The Galatians had begun the Christian life by following the Spirit and they were now trying to complete it by following the demands of the Law through their flesh, by their own efforts. Paul makes the point that it will not work.

However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, “HE WHO PRACTICES THEM SHALL LIVE BY THEM.” (Galatians 3:12)

We know from Romans 14:23 that “whatever is not from faith is sin.”

And I testify again to every man who [tries to obey one part], that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. (Galatians 5:3 phrase in braces is mine)

Paul discusses the conflict between grace and law in his letter to the Galatians, comparing these to Hagar and Sarah. Hagar (representing law) and her offspring were slaves while Sarah (representing grace) and her offspring were free.

It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery (Galatians 5:1).

When we are justified by faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ, we are no longer under the obligations of the Law.

Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. (Galatians 3:24-25)

Because of the growing conflict between Paul and those pressing the Law of Moses, the first Council was held in Jerusalem (Acts 15) to hear the various positions and to clear up this matter.

But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses." (Acts 15:5)

Paul was incensed about this and the unnecessary burden it would place on those Christians, insisting instead that we are saved by grace and not by the Law. Paul maintained that not only are we saved by grace, but we continue in life by grace.

Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are (Acts 15:10, 11).

Paul was so sure of his teaching that he wrote, "...if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!"<sup>2</sup> The word "contrary" is the Greek *para* from which we get our word parallel, a path parallel to or seeming to go in the same direction, but yet not the same path.

Paul was adamant in differentiating between Christianity and Judaism opposing every attempt on the part of the Jewish Christians to make gentile Christians subject to the Mosaic Law.

During the first Christian council in Jerusalem<sup>3</sup> both positions gave presentations and arguments. As a result of this council the following statement was formulated and sent in a letter to all gentile Christians to conclude the matter:

...the apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings . . . For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell (Acts 15:23, 28-29).

How does this pertain to giving within the body of Christ? A number of Christian leaders teach that we are required to tithe, meaning, we are to give ten percent of our earnings to the Lord in accordance with Malachi 3:8-11. This is very much a part of that same conflict.

## Old Testament Scriptures on Tithing

Whenever we hear a message on tithing we inevitably hear the words of the prophet Malachi:

Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me! But you say, 'How have we robbed You?' In tithes and offerings. 'You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing Me, the whole nation of you! Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this,' says the LORD of hosts, 'if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows. Then I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of the ground; nor will your vine in the field cast its grapes,' says the LORD of hosts. (Malachi 3:8-11)

These verses do not detail for us what tithing required, rather they admonished the Israelites to do so or be guilty of robbing God. Aside from simply giving ten percent of their earnings, as most of us understand it, what does the law of tithing require? Is there more to it? We do an injustice worse than robbing God when we present only these verses from Malachi as God's law on tithing. What the Law required of tithing is detailed for us in Deuteronomy:

You must set aside a tithe of your crops—one-tenth of all the crops you harvest each year. Bring this tithe to the designated place of worship—the place the LORD your God chooses for his name to be honored—and eat it there . . . in the presence of the LORD your God and celebrate with your household. And do not neglect the Levites in your town, for they will receive no allotment of land among you. At the end of every third year, bring the entire tithe of that year's harvest and store it in the nearest town. Give it to the Levites, who will receive no allotment of land among you, as well as to the foreigners living among you, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, so they can eat and be satisfied. Then the LORD your God will bless you in all your work. At the end of every seventh year you must cancel the debts of everyone who owes you money. (Deuteronomy 14:22-23, 26-29, 15:1 New Living Translation)

Regarding tithing, the Law instructed the Israelites that, for two out of every three years, they were to take their tithe and spend it on a lavish party “before the Lord” for themselves, their families, and the local Levites. Having this party “before the Lord” was a reminder to them that all they had received that year had come from God. For this they were to be thankful and learn to fear the Lord. Can you imagine the celebration, the parties that would be commonplace around the tabernacle and then later in Jerusalem?

On the third year of that three-year cycle, they were to collect and give the entire tithe to be stored in the nearest town to meet the needs of the local Levites, orphans, widows, and any visiting strangers. “Then the Lord will bless you in all your work.”<sup>4</sup> It was understood by the Jews that Malachi’s injunction, to bring their tithe into the storehouse, pertained to every third year. There was apparently no difficulty with the requirements of the other two years...

The instruction on tithing finishes in the first verses of chapter 15 stating that on every seventh year their tithe consisted of forgiving the debts of a fellow Jew.

Malachi also mentions offerings which today are used to suggest that our giving be more than the minimum of ten percent. Again, in the Hebrew mind would be understood to pertain not to the giving of money, but to the burnt offering, wave offering, meal offering, sin offering, drink offering, etc.

Is this different from our understanding of tithes and offerings? Do we rob God when we present a partial or perverted version as the whole truth about tithing?

The first mention of tithing in the Bible involved Abraham who predates the giving of the Law of Moses. After defeating the army that had taken his nephew Lot and other captives, Abraham gave a tenth of the spoils to Melchizedek, who was the king of Salem and also a priest of the Most High God<sup>5</sup>. There was no law to which Abram was obedient and no precedent for doing so that we know of. Was this simply something Abram had purposed in his heart as we are required to do in the New Testament model?

## **New Testament Tithing?**

What does the New Testament say about tithing?

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. (Matthew 23:23; Luke 11:42).

The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’ (Luke 18:11-13).

In this case mortal men receive tithes, but in that case one receives them, of whom it is witnessed that he lives on. And, so to speak, through Abraham even Levi, who received tithes, paid tithes, for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him (Hebrews 7:8-10).

These references pertain to OT situations and portray tithing in a negative light, except for the last one which we referred to earlier. There is no NT principle or injunction for tithing, but there is a NT principle of giving.

## **New Testament Giving**

Paul, the apostle who championed grace, gives this instruction on giving, be it money, goods, or time:

Each one must do [give] just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7 word in braces is mine).

This New Testament directive diametrically opposes any pressured giving including Malachi's warning against "robbing God." The obvious explanation is that this OT warning was given to the Jews who were still under the Law. It was never intended for Christians who are under grace.

Why is it so important to avoid things of the Law?

All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law ... (Galatians 3:10).

If we try to justify God's blessing into our lives by obeying one part of the Law, we are responsible to every part of it—otherwise we come under a curse. This applies too, when we try to observe a part of the Law, as is the case with the way tithing is presented.

There is nothing inherently wrong with the Law, rather it is our tendency to use those laws and rules to appear holy externally or to justify God's blessings and then often to compare others to our standard. We can do nothing of substance to affect our holiness or his grace, except to cooperate with God's work within us, changing us, until the new reality of Christ in us begins to show through us. Relying on or adhering to any part of the Law is dangerous and places us within the grasp of our enemy, not our God.

When our giving is by compulsion, grudgingly, or to a set amount, in obedience to a law, it is wrong. Our giving as Christians should come from joy, with the acknowledgment that all we have and all we need comes by his grace.

Paul draws an analogy between giving and sowing seed, expecting to harvest a crop.

Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully (2 Corinthians 9:6).

No farmer would sow seed without expecting a crop in return for his diligence. Were he to sow little, he would reap little. There is incentive for sowing/giving liberally in that we can expect to reap bountifully. It should, however, be our love for him that motivates our giving, our love for those around us who are in need, since we love them as we love ourselves.

He loves a cheerful giver, so if you have difficulty with giving, determine within yourself what you can give cheerfully and then give that, expecting to see a return which will likely motivate you to give more and more cheerfully. By kingdom standards even a little amounts to much when it is given with right motives.<sup>6</sup>

If the improper application of the OT tithing model met the needs of a congregation, then the NT model is even more capable.

And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed . . . Now He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness; you will be enriched in everything for all liberality, which through us is producing thanksgiving to God. (2 Corinthians 9:8, 10, 11 emphasis in bold are mine)

Had he wanted to, Paul had an excellent opportunity to include the matter of tithing in these verses, but he did not. He did, however, speak of the bountiful return that those who gave from a cheerful heart would receive—given from a cheerful heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion.

## Jesus' Word on Giving

Jesus said we are wise if we do the things he commanded us<sup>1</sup>. In fact, we would then truly be his disciples and his friends<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 7:24

<sup>2</sup> John 15

So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. "But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees *what is done* in secret will reward you. Matthew 6:2-4

Our giving needs to be discreet. No one, not even the giver, should know the details of the giving. Those who give expecting a tax receipt, which they can then declare, would be compromising Jesus' intended secrecy. Aiming religiously for the ten percent goal would require that our left hand know what our right hand was giving lest we fall short.

## Conclusion

Our congregations should experience abundance if we present the true principles of New Testament giving. These must be principles based on grace, not law, and can include the incentive that God will "multiple your seed for sowing" and "having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed" and all this to produce "thanksgiving to God." May he be praised for his grace and mercy toward us.

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<sup>1</sup> Galatians 5:12 "I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves." NASB

<sup>2</sup> Galatians 1:8 (interesting similarity to the story in 1 Kings 13)

<sup>3</sup> Acts 15

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 14:29

<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 7:1

<sup>6</sup> Mark 12:42-44