



“To Tithe or Not to Tithe? That is the Question”

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Ever wonder, “What does God expect of me when it comes to giving financially to my local church?” Or maybe you’re considering becoming a member, but you question, “Why are members asked to commit themselves to tithing to SCC?” In the following paragraphs, I’ll try to provide some answers.

Why Give?

The Bible definitely directs believers to give to the Lord: “Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the best part of everything you produce.” *Proverbs 3:9 (NLT)*

But why does God ask us to give financially? In the Bible the Lord makes it clear that it isn’t because He needs our money; it all belongs to Him (cf. Psalm 50:9-12)! Why then does He want us to give? Because God wants us to live with the realization that everything we “have” is actually on loan from Him. Scripture says, “The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it. The world and all its people belong to him.” *Psalm 24:1 (NLT)* In reality, we don’t own anything. Nothing! We’re only the caretakers of what God has loaned to us. The best we can do, really, is to give back to Him.

Most of all, as followers of Christ, how can we refuse to give? Jesus Christ gave everything for us (2 Corinthians 8:9), and He is our Lord and our example (Colossians 2:6; 1 John 2:6; 3:16).

How Much?

But how much should we be expected to give to God? Ten percent? Actually, Jesus taught that all of His followers must give nothing short of 100%! He said, “So you cannot become my disciple without giving up everything you own.” *Luke 14:33 (NLT)* We must surrender all. This means that everything God entrusts to us must be used by us for His purposes. In other words, our whole lives must be given over to Him—100%. It also means that whatever God “gives” to us we must hold onto very loosely, in case He requires us to hand it over to someone else. Our Master teaches us to be over-the-top generous: “Give to those who ask, and don’t turn away from those who want to borrow.” *Matthew 5:42 (NLT)* And so, how much? Everything!

What about Tithing?

But what about giving to a local ministry—in our case, SCC? At SCC we believe in the biblical principle of tithing. A tithe means simply a *tenth*. To tithe is to give 10% of your income to the Lord. This is a biblical practice. God says, “Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the LORD Almighty, ‘and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.’” *Malachi 3:10* Since the Israelites were told to support their spiritual leaders, we ask SCC members to commit a tithe of their income to support the ministry of SCC.

But Isn’t Tithing Passé?

Some Christians believe that tithing is not for Christians, since it was legislated only under the Mosaic Law, which has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ and is therefore not valid for us. It is indeed true that Jesus fulfilled the law (Matthew 5:17) and Christians are no longer under it (Romans 6:14; Ephesians 2:15; Hebrews 8:13). Furthermore, it is also true that the New Testament never commands local churches or individuals to give a specific percentage to God’s work. Nonetheless, as I explain below, tithing is still a good idea for a New Testament believer. How so?

Is it a Law?

Tithing is an excellent principle and practice to follow—not as a law but as a discipline of the Christian life. Most Christians (even those who don't believe in tithing) do the same sort of thing with many other practices.

For example, the New Testament never commands Christians to read the Bible everyday. Why not? Because most Christians in New Testament times couldn't read and (even if they could) had no immediate access to copies of the books of the Bible, much less personal copies. In their meetings the Scriptures were read aloud to the congregation and Christians were commanded to listen, heed, and live on God's Word (Colossians 3:16; James 1:21-22; Revelation 1:3). Unlike ours, theirs was more of an *oral culture* than a *literary culture*. Average people in oral-oriented cultures were typically much better than we are today at memorizing important teachings. Today we're geared more to the printed page or to a computer or smart phone screen. And so, a good modern-day application of the command to hear and obey God's Word is for Christians to read the Bible everyday. Many Christian pastors and Bible teachers rightly stress this practice, even though it's not spelled out this way in Scripture. The same could be said for many other Christian practices, such as having a church wedding, using musical instruments in worship, and praying before meals. These are not commanded in the New Testament, but they are based on biblical principles and make good sense.

Likewise, tithing is a sensible way to fulfill the biblical command about giving to your local ministry. At SCC we fully acknowledge that other Christians may differ with us on this practice, but as members we commit together to tithe to SCC in order to support this ministry. Also, SCC gives at least 10% to missions from what is given to the general offering. And so we practice tithing both on the individual as well as the corporate level. We encourage parents to train their children to tithe, so that when they grow up, it will be an established practice for them.

Why 10%?

But why 10% and not some other percentage? Giving 10% is a principle that goes back to Abraham (Genesis 14:20), who, in the New Testament, is called the Father of all who believe (Romans 4:11). Tithing was also practiced by Jacob (renamed Israel), the founder of the people/nation of God (Genesis 28:22). These men stand, in a special way, for all believers throughout time. Centuries after Abraham and Jacob, God required tithing in the law (Leviticus 27:30-32; Deuteronomy 14:22-29; 26:12). In the Mosaic system, the Levites, under the direction of the priests, collected tithes regularly from the Israelites so that they could be used for the various purposes specified in the law (Nehemiah 10:37-39). Actually, the percentage the Israelites were required to give under the law may have well exceeded 10% (anywhere from 17-23%). In any case, the principle of tithing existed among God's people long before the law.

Actually, at SCC we stress the principle more than the precise percentage. Ten percent is a good benchmark for your regular giving. If you're worried, however, about it becoming legalistic for you to give a precise tithe, we would suggest, perhaps, give 9% or 11%, or vary it year by year. For a Christian struggling financially, 10% should be the mark to reach. But many Christians can afford to give more than a tithe.

But Why Not Just "Give Generously"?

Perhaps the most common objection to tithing among some Christians is that in the New Testament we're not required to give a certain percentage but to give voluntarily, cheerfully, and generously. The classic text is 2 Corinthians 9:6-11, along with others (e.g., 2 Corinthians 8; Philippians 4:14-19). To be sure, these passages indeed give us many important lessons about Christian giving. But what's almost always left out when these passages are cited against tithing is that all of them are speaking about *special gifts* for special circumstances (i.e., what we today often call "special offerings") rather than the regular giving New Testament Christians practiced. These texts are simply not directly addressing the subject of giving regularly to the Lord's work. Certainly Christians should give generously and cheerfully, but tithing helps a Christian to begin to understand what "generous" really means. By biblical standards 10% is a good place to begin.

But it's a mistake for critics of tithing to take passages addressing special offerings and apply them directly to regular giving without any explanation of the context or the differences involved. Giving to special offerings or various projects or particular needs that arise should be above and beyond your regular tithe. That's where true generosity enters the picture, as the passages cited above indicate.

Actually, the New Testament says very little about regular giving *in terms of amount*, even though regular giving was surely expected. Christians were taught to support their church leaders financially (1 Corinthians 9:13-14; Galatians 6:6; 1 Timothy 5:17-18). But how much? We're not told. And so, in the absence of specific instruction about the amount of regular giving, it is reasonable to look to the Old Testament for principles to guide us.

What Did Jesus Teach about Tithing?

But it's not only from the Old Testament where we find instruction about tithing. Jesus Himself commended the practice of tithing in Matthew 23:23 and Luke 11:42. What's fascinating about these two texts is that Jesus speaks positively of tithing in the middle of blasting the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees! He tells them that they were scrupulous about tithing but neglected justice, mercy, and faithfulness—the most important matters of all. But then He says, “You should have practiced the latter [i.e., tithing] without neglecting the former [i.e., justice, mercy, and faithfulness].” *Matthew 23:23 (NIV; brackets added)*. Even while He scolds their hypocrisy, Jesus still makes it clear that tithing is a good thing! This is remarkable.

But some will object that Jesus was speaking before the cross in these passages to people who were still under the Law of Moses. That's true, of course. But after His resurrection Jesus told His disciples (and us) to observe *everything* He commanded (during His teaching ministry) until the end of the age (Matthew 28:19-20). That would include His remarks about tithing. At the very least, we can derive giving principles from Jesus' teaching on tithing. While Jesus felt free to terminate other practices of the Mosaic Law during His earthly ministry—such as dietary laws (Mark 7:19) and oath taking (Matthew 5:33-37)—He never did that with tithing. On the contrary, He gave tithing His nod of approval.

Conclusion and a Personal Word

To wrap up this discussion, at SCC we believe tithing is a valid, biblical principle for the Christian life and a worthy discipline to require of our members. Debbie and I have practiced tithing since early in our marriage. We're not financially wealthy (by U.S. standards), but God has always amply supplied all our needs—even during the lean times. We have found that the best way to give regularly to God's work is to take at least 10% of our gross income right off the top and give it to our local church. (Giving beyond our tithe goes to special offerings or other ministry needs.) In one sense, tithing for us is just like paying the mortgage or the electric bill. We do this rain or shine, when there's plenty and when there's little. But in another sense, tithing is *not* just another bill. It's an act of worship. When the offering is collected at church, I feel like a little kid! I like to be the one who places the envelope into the offering pouch. (Online giving complicates this a bit.) As I give, I like to say privately to the Lord, “Father, with this I worship you!”