

Tithing is a Bible truth

by Ken Hemphill



A morning news program once devoted a segment to the question of whether the Bible teaches tithing. The reporter featured a book by Russell Kelly entitled "Should the Church Teach Tithing?" As a whole, the program had a decidedly negative overtone when it came to the biblical practice of stewardship we call "tithing."

Most of the arguments were gathered around a few predictable stack-poles:

1. Church leaders have used verses taken out of context.
2. Pastors have abused the teaching of the tithe to manipulate people to give.
3. The practice of a weekly collection is of relatively recent origin.
4. Tithing is a part of a legal system, while believers are under grace.
5. Certain televangelists have used the tithe to fund their own extravagant lifestyle.

What are we to say about such objections?

The program was brief, and thus only sound bites of much larger arguments were broadcast. Let's look at a primary New Testament text where Jesus mentions tithing, Matthew 23:23. The context is a denunciation of the scribes (experts in the Law) and the Pharisees (legalists).

Scripture

Jesus brings seven specific charges, each beginning with the phrase "Woe to you ...". Following the introduction there is a brief cameo illustrating their failure to live up to the claim to be guardians of the Law. The fourth woe involves tithing as taught in the Old Testament Law. As might be expected, the first century legalists had been meticulous in observing the law. They had tithed their garden herbs. Jesus charged that they had neglected the weightier matters of justice, mercy, and faith - echoing the summary of true religion given by Micah (6:8). Jesus insists, "These things should have been done without neglecting the others."

This passage is not that difficult to understand in its present context. The mastery of elementary matters such as tithing is no excuse to ignore weightier issues. Nonetheless, it is obvious that Jesus believed and taught that tithing was a fundamental aspect of faith.

Abuse

We must confess that some pastors on occasions have used biblical texts related to tithing in a manipulative manner to raise the budget or to build a building. Such behavior should not be tolerated, but it does not alter the basic biblical teaching. We should clearly teach that the stewardship of one's entire life is an act of worship and celebration. Tithing should not be connected to subscribing a budget, nor should it be presented as a means of receiving financial favor from God.

Weekly offerings

The historical argument cited in the broadcast was based on the need of the church to receive weekly offerings when the church was no longer funded by the state. I would insist that the church should never have been funded by the government in the first place and that a better historical marker would be the early church, not relatively recent history. Recent history contains numerous examples of misunderstanding and misapplication of biblical teaching, but that fact does not alter basic biblical teaching. The church should always examine its teaching based on biblical truth, not historical tradition.

Legalism

The issue of tithing being a matter of the law in a community defined by grace misses the mark on several points.

First, the tithe preceded the giving of the Law. The first mention of tithing is found in Genesis 14:20 where Abram gives Melchizedek a tenth of all he had. Abram has defeated Chedorlaomer and thus is entitled to the spoils taken in battle. The contrast in the story is telling. The defeated king of Sodom wants to make a deal with Abram, allowing him to keep the goods and returning the people to him. Melchizedek, on the other hand, meets Abram on his return and provides for his needs, bringing him bread and wine. Abram's spontaneous gift of the tithe is based on his renewed understanding that "God Most High" is the possessor of the heaven and earth. This is a biblical truth that goes back to the beginning chapters of Genesis. The spontaneous act of tithing was later codified in the Law.

Second, grace does not negate the Law but rather fills it full of meaning. If one looks at Jesus' treatment of various Old Testament Laws in the Sermon on the Mount, we will find that He always exceeds the Law by internalizing and intensifying it. For example, one might outwardly obey the Law about murder but yet express intense anger toward his brother. Now in the Kingdom instituted by grace, this person stands guilty (Matt. 5:21-22).

By the way, Jesus actually mentions the practice of giving in this same context. He indicates

that when you come to present an offering and you remember that your brother has something against you, you should go and be reconciled to your brother. But that is not the end of one's duty under grace. He must "then come and present your offering" (5:24). It would be a disgrace to grace to indicate that the person who has received grace would do less than one under the Law.

Televangelists

How do we answer the objection that "some televangelists" have manipulated their hearers and used the tithe to fund an extravagant lifestyle? We must always stand against any and every abuse of spiritual authority. But the fact that some abuse their office does not provide an excuse for us to ignore the teaching of Scripture.

We could point to "charlatans" in any and every profession. We might, for example, discover that a medical doctor has used his profession to fund an extravagant lifestyle. First, that doesn't mean that most doctors are doing the same. Second, it doesn't mean that we should ignore principles taught by legitimate physicians.

Having said that, church leaders should be rigorous about good stewardship of all the funds over which they have responsibility. For example, Paul gives a detailed description of those who will be delivering the offering intended for the saints in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8:16-24). Church leaders must practice holistic stewardship with absolute integrity. After all, everything belongs to the King, is intended to advance His kingdom and to bring glory to Him alone. We are privileged to participate in His kingdom activity here on earth and we will be privileged to serve him for all eternity.

But "tithing" is not the entire story. The Bible teaches the stewardship of all of one's life - time, talents and treasures. We serve a King who has equipped us for kingdom service and has thus enabled us to live daily in such a manner that we can lay up treasures in heaven. Paul actually gives clear teaching about how one can advance to hilarious grace-empowered giving (2 Corinthians 8-9). We should not be content to argue about the amount of the tithe; we should develop a kingdom lifestyle that will enable us to give ourselves completely as "living sacrifice" to the King. To do so means that we will have to deal with issues such as our spending habits and unbiblical debt.

God is concerned about how we manage all of the resources that He has placed at our disposal. Don't become a modern-day Pharisee and believe that the tithe exempts you from "weightier matters."

Ken Hemphill is National Strategist for Empowering Kingdom Growth of the Southern Baptist Convention. He is the author of *You Are Gifted and Eternal Impact*.

[Longview Links:](#)

Some of the content found on this site is used with permission from these sources