

LORD, TEACH US TO GIVE

Dr. George O. Wood

I'm familiar with a book that says Real Men Don't Eat Quiche. My attitude as pastor is real pastors don't ever admit a need. It just slays me. I'd rather go to the woodshed than talk to you about giving. The last sermon I preached on tithing was in 1977 to the best of my recollection so I'm not riding this as a hobbyhorse. I deeply believe in it. But because I feel that my salary is paid out of the giving of the church I'm in a conflict of interest, a hopeless conflict of interest when I speak on the subject. And for that sake I don't like to speak on it. In my own life I've found that tithing and giving to the Lord's word is one of the great thrills of my life so if you'll let me as a pastor speak on this subject today. If you don't let me I'll probably have to ahead anyway.

The Lord is capable of meeting our needs and the Lord does meet our needs. I remember a time a number of years ago when our church income was about \$3000 a week and we had a special need of \$5000. At that time I felt like the Lord didn't want us to say anything about it. In fact that's my predilection almost all the time. Just go on. The Lord will meet the need. Sure enough the particular Sunday we needed it the most that evening the deacons who were counting the offering, the deacon in charge came to me and said, The offering today was about \$3000 but there is this one check in the offering that's rather strange. We're not putting it into deposit because we're not sure that someone's not pulling something on us. I asked What the check was for? He said, "It's for \$5000." I said, "By all means put it in." He said "But the check has the name on it, "Brother Barnabus and Brother Samuel. And that's all it has. We don't know anybody by that name. It may be legitimate. It may not be." I said, "When the bank opens tomorrow we'll call them. We called the next morning to the bank and gave them the name on the account. They came back and said these people do have an account here at the bank. You can cash the check. It's good."

To this day I don't know who Brother Barnabus and Brother Samuel are. But if you're in the audience, thank you. That's always been a tremendous encouragement to me every time the church has had needs. The Lord is capable of meeting the needs of his body.

But this particular Sunday I felt that the needs are to be met through proper teaching from myself as pastor from the scripture. I sense especially a need to teach on giving in light of some of the feedback I had this week regarding my statement, The tithe belongs to the local church and giving beyond the tithe to other ministries should be done if the Lord lays that on our heart. But we shouldn't just take our tithe and distribute it to this ministry and that ministry. Then take it out of the storehouse. I felt that I needed to say something about this.

Perhaps too my experience suggests that Christians really want to give. My experience with this church has been that the people of God really want to give and love to give and always give when they're aware of the need. My personal problems with giving as an individual Christian have come from different levels. Maybe they're some of your problems.

One of my problems initially in giving to the Lord was the feeling that I do not earn enough money to afford to give to the work of the Lord. I grew up as a preacher's kid, I grew up as a missionary's kid. When I graduated from seminary and landed my first job teaching at Evangel college my pay was \$6500 a year. Jewel and I just got married and then Evangeline came along and we were making very slim pickins. I said to myself, "I'm teaching at a Christian college.

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I'm giving my time to the Lord in a special way and I really can't afford to tithe to the church." It seemed like the more I didn't tithe the worse our financial situation got. Till finally the Lord said to me, "You're teaching Bible, George. Are you living the Bible?" It was hard for me to admit that an area of scripture which I knew was clear I was not living it. So we did one of the most difficult things at the time I thought we'd ever do and that is off the top begin writing a check to the church for our tithe. It was amazing how gradually our financial situation straightened out as well.

Sometimes we feel that we don't have enough to give.

There's another reason sometimes we don't give and that is maybe we've been encouraged to give for the wrong reasons. We've been emotionally stimulated. Or we've been promised something and it hasn't come to pass. One of my earliest experiences of manipulation of Christians to give and there's so much of that in the body of Christ. But when I was a little kid somewhere in the Midwest, my dad was driving the car. I was sitting in the back seat and we were listening to the radio. It was late at night. XEG – the voice of North America came on. It was ostensibly a Christian station. As a little kid I'll never forget the appeal for funds that was coming out of XEG that night. "Send your \$5.00 offering this week to XEG, the voice of North America, and in return for your gift we will send you an autographed picture of Jesus and the twelve apostles." I can think of a lot of giveaways I've heard over the years but I don't think any has topped that.

Then sometimes we don't give because we're disappointed with the return. We feel "Lord, we gave to you and you haven't given back like we thought you would." As a seminarian, so smart in theology, I'd argue with my mother who had spiritual experience but didn't have good theology. At least it wasn't good at that time to me. As I get older it was pretty good. I'd say to her, "Mother, you've tithed all your life and you give sacrificially to the work of the Lord and look at how poor you are." And mom and dad were poor. "The Lord doesn't seem to have blessed you." She'd say, "He's blessed us. He doesn't have to bless us materially. He's blessed us with so many things. He's blessed us with you." How do you argue with a mother like that?

Sometimes we don't give because we don't feel it's not being invested wisely. I think it's always well that as stewards giving money we know it's being used wisely.

Let's look at what the scripture teaches about three kinds of giving. First the tithe. Secondly, giving out of our abundance. Third, giving sacrificially. Those three levels of giving to the work of the Lord.

First the tithe.

I'm not going to bore you to tears with a lengthy examination of scriptural passages on tithing. I'll simply note that it's there. The first mention of tithing in the scripture is in Genesis 14:20 where Abraham the man of faith pays tithes, a tenth of all that he has to the ruler of Jerusalem, a man by the name of Melchizedek whom, Hebrews 7 uses as an analogy of Jesus. Melchizedek meaning king of righteousness and Jerusalem meaning city of peace Abraham paid tithes to the king of righteousness who ruled over the city of peace. The writer of Hebrews says this is a type of Christ, Abraham the man of faith, paid tithes to the man who represented Jesus who had no genealogy, no beginning or end. In fact the writer of Hebrews goes on to say that the whole system of the law, the priesthood, that Levi who was the head of the priests was in Abraham's

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loins. When Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek, that is to Jesus. Therefore the Old Testament system itself paid tithes to the prince of peace. It's kind of one of the lines of arguments in the book of Hebrews that Jesus is better. There are therefore some who say that tithing is an Old Testament principle. It's a principle of the law. We simply says, no the Lord established tithing as a principle before the law and it was given to that one who represents a model of what it is to be a man or woman of faith.

Jacob who was before the law, also in Genesis 28:22 pays tithes and promises the Lord that he will give him a tenth. The tithe principle in the law is established in Leviticus 27:30-32 where the Lord speaking to an agriculture economy says, Bring a tenth of the crops and bring a tenth of the animals. In defining the tithes says you're to tithe every tenth animal that passes under the rod. That is as the shepherd is standing there the animals go by in a line and he doesn't have the liberty of redirecting that the sick animal be the tenth animal. But instead just to take one out of ten as they come by.

Throughout the Old Testament as well as the New Testament in fact the principles is to give the best and the first to the Lord. All of us who have been in the ministry or who have known missionaries can tell a lot of funny stories in this regard. People not giving the best to the Lord. They're funny now. When it happened at times they weren't so funny. As a missionary kid in northwest China we would periodically receive missionary barrels which were often such well used clothes that nobody in the states would have worn then so they figured the missionaries would wear them and we did. No problem. One of my all time favorite stories though was the missionary who was in India who received in their missionary barrel from this church that was giving it discards a box of used t-bags. Marvelous example of not giving the best to the Lord. The scripture asks for the best. And the first.

Malachi 3:8-12 is a very specific passage where the prophet addresses the people of God and says, You've been robbing the Lord. And they say, How did we rob him? By not bringing your whole tithe into the storehouse. Then Malachi goes on to say, bring those tithes and the Lord will return prosperity to the land.

Many times we use that scripture on an individual basis. Lord, if I tithe you'll bring me prosperity. There is a sense in which the Lord does this. I'll talk about how he does this in a later moment. But we do well not to treat this scripture as a spiritual Las Vegas slot machine. Lord, I put in my four quarters and the machine spits back six. Malachi 3, if you study it closely, it's really talking about the corporate people of God. And saying if all the people of God will do this then the total need within the community of God will be met and there will be surplus spilling out. And God will bless.

This indeed happens in a church. I think the world has yet to discover the power of a church where everyone tithes. We'll find that not only is it sufficient to meet the need that God has given that local body in terms of ministry goals. But there then is the pick up that comes to meeting those needs in the congregation where people are out of work where they need help in a rent payment, where there are hurting personal financial situations that are going on. When the people of God tithe there is abundance to minister to need as well.

Jesus himself endorsed the tithe. Matthew 23:23 he tells the Pharisees and the hypocrites who were such legalists that they were tithing their condiments – mint, dill, and cumin. He says that's

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ok that you did this. Your problem was that you neglected justice mercy and faith. You ought to have done that without neglecting the other. That is, without neglecting the tithe.

In fact, Jesus who lived under the law and made himself conformable to the law was never accused by anyone of breaking the law, himself not being a tither. He was accused of many things but that he was never accused of.

It's my understanding from the scripture that the scripture is very clear on the matter that although God owns everything and although all of our life is owned by God, yet there is a draw that God has upon the first ten percent of our income.

If that is the case, then let me make some observations.

First is if those under the Old Testament supported the work of the Lord with a minimum of ten percent I think, how much more should I under the New Testament be willing to support the work of the work? I always struggle with those who say this is an Old Testament principle. They say, From the book of Hebrews we know that we have a better priesthood, a better covenant, a better altar, a better sacrifice. We have the Lord. If people did that under a system that was old how much more should we under a system where we have privilege give to the Lord.

Secondly, I found that in regard to the tithe, the tithe should be the first check we write off of our paycheck. What ever my paycheck is I take the gross amount, the total amount before the deductions start coming in and move the decimal one place over and find the ten percent. If you're not doing that, that is scary as all get out! I'll also note from experience – I don't know how many tithers I talk to all have had this experience. If you start paying your bills and then wait to see if there's anything left over to tithe, you will never be able to tithe. I know that. You don't have to try the experiment. I know that. I've tried it that way. There's never anything left over.

But amazingly, and I don't understand God's mathematics but I've found that when I tithe first then there is sufficient. There's been times when I've needed to adjust payment schedules and the like but I've found that by giving first I have consciously fulfilled the Lord's request that I seek his kingdom first.

In fact, I've found that I live better (and other tithers say this) off the 90% than I ever did on the 100%. I think one of the reasons for this is that tithing helps you become a far more disciplined person.

Thirdly, I believe that the scriptures teach us that the tithe belongs in one place. It belongs in the storehouse. Malachi isn't saying put 2% over here and 2% over there and 3% over there. But bring the whole tithe into the storehouse.

From a New Testament perspective it would be my understanding that the church is that storehouse from which we receive ministry and give ministry for the reaching of our community and for the training of the body of Christ to advance in the life of Christ. The storehouse.

Before the year 2000 we have a dream in our heart of what we want to see the Lord do by the end of this millenium. We want to see this church grow and fill up the space that God has given

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us on this property. We've got one more building project to do before that's done. Then we want to then begin planting other churches. It's going to take a lot of kingdom resources to dot the landscape of South Orange County with churches. Bring the tithe into the storehouse.

I struggle with this on a personal level because I'm a card carrying ordained member of the Assemblies of God. I value that relationship. For one thing it holds me to integrity and to accountability which I believe all of us in the gospel ministry need. But part of being a minister is we are required to support our church leadership. The district program, the national program so much a month. For years I simply took that out of my tithe. About 7 or 8 years ago as I was writing out my check I felt the Lord speak to me and say, *George do you believe that the whole tithe belongs in the storehouse?* Yes, I believe that. I teach people that. *What are you doing taking part of your tithes away?* I felt like the Lord say to me, trust me. Give the tithe to the church and I'll take care of what you owe to the district and elsewhere.

Since that time I've been doing that and it's been a great growth experience. The tithe belongs in one place, the storehouse.

A fourth thing about the tithe is the absence of the tithe hurts the work of the Lord. There's a principle of universality. Would I want my patterns of giving to be universal? I believe the Lord has designed the church to operate on the tithe of all the people – the young, the old, no matter what level of income we're on.

The Lord teaches us that we're under a curse if we do not tithe. I believe this not so much represents a personal curse but the fact that the whole work of God, or the work of God as a whole suffers when the full tithe is not there. At the same time the work of God prospers when the full tithe is there. That's reaffirmed in 2 Corinthians 9 in terms of what we sow God gives to us as a harvest liberally.

Then one other thing on tithing before I move to the two other areas of giving. Let tithing become such a habit that you are never even tempted to take it for personal use. I think any of us in our beginning of tithing have found that it's a struggle for the first three months or even twelve months to tithe. We just are battling this budget which isn't used to this kind of discipline or priority. But as you keep tithing it becomes such a habit in your life and such a response of love to the Lord there comes a moment I believe in Christian experience where that is no longer a struggle. I would no more think of taking the tithe and spending it on our resources than I would think of going out and killing somebody. Killing somebody is not a temptation to me. I have other temptations but killing people is not one of them. Fortunately for me taking the tithe is not either. I believe this comes through regular discipline.

Tithe. If you're not tithing begin at that level of commitment in giving to the Lord.

But there are other kinds of giving in the scripture. There's a second kind of giving where we say, Lord teach us to give out of our abundance. I'm on the presbytery for southern California assemblies of God. One of our responsibilities is to interview candidates for the ministry. They have a lengthy application they fill out. One of the questions is "Do you believe in tithing and do you practice tithe?" As a response to the question, Do you believe in tithing? The ministerial candidate said, "I'm not sure." We have a practice in the district of not giving anyone ministerial credential who is not sure about tithing. We feel that's a part of scripture so you need to be sure about that.

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So when this young man came into the committee we asked he about that, “Why did you answer ‘I’m not sure,’ on the question.” He said, “The reason why I answered ‘I’m not sure,’ is I think we ought to be giving more than the tithe. That’s what I really think the scriptures talk about. They talk about proportional giving. In America God has greatly blesses us and most of us could give way more than the tithe.” We thought that was a pretty good answer.

In the scripture you look at three kinds of giving that were in addition to the tithe. You look at the people of God who gave for building projects. In Exodus 35 there is the marvelous story of the building of the tabernacle in the wilderness where the call went out, Let him who would give willingly give. It was not a mandated giving. It was not required. The tithe is God’s requirement but the giving for the tabernacle was a freewill offering gift. It was whatever people wanted to do. The call went out and the offering became so great that finally the leaders came to Moses and said, “You’ve got to tell the people to quit giving, we’ve got too much.” Why did they have to tell them this? Because the people were giving spontaneously and joyfully out of their abundance.

Same thing happens in 1 Chronicles 29 where David is assembling the materials to build the temple. Once again the people give willingly and joyfully to the work of the Lord.

Then another kind of giving that we see in the scripture is in addition to building buildings is support of needy people in the body. In the book of Acts, right at the birth of the church instantly the church of Jerusalem was concerned about the poor among them. Then in Acts 11 the church in Antioch was concerned about the poor in Jerusalem. Support of the needy in the body.

I would even stretch that understanding of needy in the body to include giving to missions. Because we are through that reaching out to help national churches do what they cannot do to win their own people to the Lord. We’re giving them great assistance and caring for the body through missions giving.

We have found that we can give far more to the Lord than we ever dreamed possible. To not only give a tithe but a second tithe and to give beyond a second tithe. My own personal goal would be like W. A. Criswell pastor of the great First Baptist church in Dallas, Texas who at the end of about 35 years of pastoring that church stood before the congregation and handed it a check and said, “Here’s all the pay the church has paid me all these years.” He’d invested what he had and gave it all back to the church. I want to do that personally for the work of the Lord. The work of the Lord is more important than a lot of personal needs I have in my life. So being able to give more means that I re-evaluate my own personal stewardship and make a distinction between what is truly a need and what could be instead better invested for eternity.

In the Bible we find people giving to support buildings. We find them supporting the needy in the body in addition to their tithes. And we find them supporting ministries. Jesus’ ministry was even supported. Luke 8:3 there were women traveling with Jesus who helped support him out of their own means. The whole letter of Paul to the Philippians is really a thank you letter to a congregation that had supported his ministry.

Then a third kind of giving beyond a tithe and beyond giving out of abundance is to give sacrificially. There’s a marvelous example of this in Luke 21. Jesus is at the temple and he’s

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watching people put money in the offering. He's seeing all the people with large gifts come by and making a big fanfare about their gift. Then he sees a little widow put in her two cents and the scripture says, All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth but she gave out of her poverty and gave all she had to live on. The Lord commends her for her sacrificial giving.

Paul does the same thing in 2 Corinthians 8 where he tells the Corinthian church, Your neighbors up to the north, the Christians up in Macedonia, have given out of their poverty and they have given joyfully and given even beyond their ability.

I'm not sure American Christians truly know what sacrifice is. But I could define it in our culture as this: giving sacrificially is giving in such a way so that it alters your life style.

Haggai 1:4, the time of the rebuilding of the temple. Haggai says to the people, "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses while this house remains a ruin?"

There are some things that only the Lord does. There are some things that the Lord asks us to do. And sometimes even when we don't do them, the Lord intervenes and does them himself.

But giving to the support of the work of the Lord is something the Lord asks us to do. There were things that only Jesus could do for Lazarus. Only Jesus could say to Lazarus, come forth. Man could never do that. Only the Lord could do that. But the things which Jesus' disciples could do Jesus let them do and wouldn't do them himself. So he told them, You untie him and let him go. That they could do. He doesn't do their work. He lets them do it.

Part of being in the work of the Lord is knowing that there are some things we can never do that only the Lord does. There are other things he lets us be yoke fellows with him in.

I can stand before you and say truthfully and say to the best of my conscious as it is allowed to search itself we have sought to be good stewards in the administration of this church. We have sought to have the right priorities. We have sought not to be elegant but to be simple and to do things well. We have sought to care for the needy. We do not advertise this. But this church cares for the needy in its midst. We have cared for the work of the Lord elsewhere. Our books are open. We will stand before God or stand before you and answer with integrity I believe. What you the congregation have entrusted to the work of the Lord here. There is much yet however to be done. Much yet that God is calling us as a church to do.

I want to thank you for allowing me to share my heart with you and the scripture with you today. I realize you didn't know what you were getting in for when you came to church this morning. You thought you were getting into Luke 11:1-4. But none of you walked out while I was preaching. I appreciate that. I would ask that you simply consider in your heart your financial stewardship to God's work and the Lord's work here. If you are not now tithing would you begin even today? Take this paycheck and begin to tithe. If you are scattering your tithe would you bring it all in to the storehouse? And if you are tithing and would like to increase your faith and do some growing and stretching would you consider going beyond that? Every missions conference convention we've had in this church, I've made this a policy because we have them every six months, we have a faith promise card. I always say to the Lord, "Help me this six months to stretch it just a little bit more." It's amazing how every time I've had faith to respond to the Lord in that way, I've been able to do it. Lord, help us to do more.

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The Lord doesn't want anyone to give to his work begrudgingly or out of a sense of guilt. 2 Corinthians 9:7 says the Lord loves a cheerful giver. The word "cheerful" there in the Greek is the word from which we get the English word "hilarious." So the Lord is very pleased when in our giving we do it joyfully and just do it happily because we're saying through that, Lord, what happens with your work is so important and I'm so glad to be a part of it. Lord, I pray that through my giving and through the involvement of my life you will really build your church.

Lord, we want to thank you for your giving which really never stops and which is always fully and complete. It is from the model of your giving to us that we pick up in our own lives upon giving. Lord, I suppose that you could have eternally endowed your church by dumping billions of gold brick on the day of Pentecost. And letting your church operate off the endowment. But you choose not to do it that way. You know Lord, that what we need to spiritually grow. You know the joy that we need to have in feeling a part of your work, part of something that really counts. Lord, in giving to you we bless your name. We're really giving to you, Lord. We're not giving to an institution or to a personality. We just really give because we love you. We want to place all of our gifts first in your hands and then say, Lord, through these gifts bless your work. Bless your work as it ministers to boys and girls, to teenagers, to old people. Bless your work as it goes across the seas to the distant reaches of the earth. Bless your work as we attempt to be a church ministering for you in this area. Lord, I thank you for all of those who today are evaluating their giving commitments and who are going to make decisions that require faith and discipline. That you'll honor and bless the pure intention that comes from the hearts of all of us. We thank you and bless you. In Christ's name. Amen.