

TITHING AND CHRISTIAN STEWARDSHIP
The Christian and Money
Dr. George O. Wood

I suspect that many of you made a New Year's resolution. This message is for those of you who've made resolutions and have already broken all of them. I'm going to give you a new one. Or for those of you who didn't make any at all this one is for you.

Last year I made the mistake of publicly announcing my resolution was to lose twenty-five pounds. I really wanted to do that. But I guess I never really intended to. It was a day by day decision, the choice of foregoing French toast and chocolate doughnuts was a day to day decision and somehow I could not distract myself from that opportunity. O for a capacity equal to my opportunity!

I realize that a lot of resolution never get done. We think they're good ideas but we don't really intend to do it. What if in 1987 I stood before you and said, I intend to quit stealing in 1987. That would have taken you by surprise. That's something that preachers ought not to do. Some resolutions we understand are meant to be morally binding on us that aren't discretionary like a lose weight resolution.

There is a resolution that I feel has a scriptural mandate on it. It is not in the discretionary area of resolutions. My title is a sneaky one to let you know that on the first Sunday I preach in 1988 I want to speak to you on the theme of tithing and Christian stewardship. If you haven't made that resolution yet in your life to do it, that you would allow God's word to speak to you through me today and that that would be a product of this time that we have together.

As we begin this year of 1988 as a church family I would like to see this church undergirded with the kind of support which will allow us to make significant advances for the kingdom of God in this community in this year. I know it is the desire of all of our heart and hundreds of this congregation have been praying for God to move in a unique and sovereign way in this church and in this community. We want to blend our hearts and hands and voices in support to see that happen. It is going to also require as we move out in expansion this year that everyone be on board in every way including financial stewardship.

The other day we were in Cairo. Our tour guide named Mohammed was reviewing the history of Christianity in Egypt. He himself is a Muslim. I wondered if he as a Muslim would really tell us the truth or try to gloss over the act of what really happened. But he told the truth. He said the Christian community in Egypt today at the most number fifteen percent of the population. That is largely Coptic Christian. He said there used to be a time up until the seventh century when the Christians were in the majority. Vast majority in Egypt. They were the vast majority all through North Africa. He said that there were three things that Christians had a chance to do when the Muslims gained military and political power in the 7th century.

The new Muslim rulers gave the Christians three options. One, convert to Islam. Or two, you could remain a Christian but you must pay annually a tax. Muslims don't have to pay it, just Christians. Or third, off comes your head.

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Within a hundred years the church was almost obliterated in all of North Africa. Not because people took option number three – martyrdom. But because on a day to day, week by week, month by month, year by year level it simply cost too much to be a Christian.

I find that the Christian faith is one of practicality. There are some who want to only talk about faith in its mystical element and in its spiritualization. But being a Christian involves not only the spiritual aspect of life. It involves the integration of the material into life as well. It involves practicality as well as spirituality.

Tithing is one of those practical expressions of our faith. The giving of ten percent of our income or more to the Lord's work. Tithing will not make you Christian. But not tithing will make serious questions as to whether or not you are committed to be a disciple of the Lord. A disciple is one who has chosen to live under the discipline of Jesus.

Three things about tithing.

One, tithing is God's will. I realize that there are some believers who do not feel like it's so or maybe you've maybe never thought through the matter and just assumed that it's an Old Testament kind of thing. But I'd like to establish for a moment or two the fact of what I'm saying to you on tithing is contained in God's word which is meant to control and govern our life. It is contained four different ways.

First it's contained within the law and the prophets of the Old Testament. It's part of what's called the Mosaic code or the legislation of Moses. The clearest example of Mosaic teaching on tithing turn to the third book of the Old Testament, the last chapter of the book. Leviticus 27. The last verses. 30-34. It explicitly talks about the tithe. A tithe or a tenth of everything from the land whether grain from the oil or from the trees belongs to the Lord. It is holy to the Lord. Whenever that term "holy to the Lord" is used it means that it is restricted. It is not for personal use. It is set aside for God's use.

"If a man redeems any of his tithe he must add a fifth of value to it." Case in point: a farmer has grown his crops that year and says I'd really like to keep that ten percent for myself this year and not give it to the Lord. So the Mosaic code allows for that tenth to be kept providing that it is later redeemed at a price like a Visa or Mastercard credit – twenty percent a year. Redeem it with a fifth.

The entire tithe of the herd and flock – grain and trees and flock were the currency of the biblical world. It was a time before coinage. You had what you grew or you had livestock. The entire tithe of the herd and flock every tenth animal that passes under the shepherd's rod will be holy to the Lord. That is that is also set aside. It's not for common use. "He must not pick out the good from the bad or make any substitution." That is he's to line them up, count them out and every tenth one is the Lord's. If you're the shepherd, the owner of the sheep, you see your great big fat ram is the tenth one. Just ahead of him is that sickly lamb that's going to die anyway. Can I switch the order?

This word is saying, no you can't do that. "If anyone makes a substitution, both the animal and its substitute become holy and cannot be redeemed. These are the commands of the Lord which he gave Moses on Mt. Sinai."

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Notice this is not Moses' idea. This is from the Lord. These are the Lord's commands.

The prophet Malachi backs up the law. 3:6-12 "I the Lord do not change." We often use that scripture in regard to the immutability of God. God does not change. It's interesting that in the original setting in which that phrase occurs, it is at the front end of a section on tithing.

"So you descendants of Jacob are not destroyed. Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and not kept them. Return to me." We're not the only people who've had a difficult time with tithing. It was difficult for the people of the old covenant. "Return to me, and I'll return to you says the Lord almighty. But you ask, how are we to return? 'Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.' But you ask 'How do we rob you?' 'In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse, the whole nation of you because you are robbing me. 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 flood gates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have enough room for it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops. And the vines in your fields will not cast their fruits, says the Lord almighty. Then all the nations will call you blessed. For yours will be a delightful land says the Lord almighty."

Tithing. Substantiated in the law and the prophets. You say that's the Mosaic legislation. Let me go to one other aspect of tithing that is that tithing was taught in the scripture before the giving of the law through Moses. Centuries before Moses, the man of faith not the man or law, Abraham becomes the first tither of the Bible. His story is told in Hebrews 7. He meets Melchizedek, a mystical king of Jerusalem whose name means both king of peace and king of righteousness. Abraham meets him and gives him a tenth of all he has. The writer of Hebrews makes the point that at that moment the descendants of Aaron, that is the Levites, were not yet born, to whom tithes would later be paid. They were at that moment instead in Abraham's loins. And therefore symbolically within Abraham, Abraham was paying the tithe to Melchizedek who serves as a representative of Jesus. Tithe is before the Law of Moses, practiced by the man of faith who gave the tithe of a person who is representative of Jesus, a priest who lives forever.

The third reason why I say that tithing is a scriptural mandate is that not only is it the law and the prophets in Abraham. But it also established that Jesus approved tithing. In fact he was a person who lived under the law and kept it, he himself would have been a tither.

Matthew 23:23 Jesus specifically approves tithing where he is denouncing the scribes and the Pharisees for their hypocrisy. He notes in that particular reference that they tithe dill and mint and cumin, which is little garden vegetables. They count them all out – one out of ten belongs to the Lord. Jesus did not condemn them for tithing. Rather he says these ought you to have done [the tithe you ought to have done] but you should not have neglected justice mercy and faith.

Any message on tithing needs to include the fact that tithing is not the sum total of what it means to be a Christian. It is an aspect of our Christian life. But we must wed to it all the qualities that Christ is calling us to live with – justice, mercy and faith.

Tithing is therefore scripturally taught. The law prophets, Abraham, Jesus.

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There are those who say this. In the New Testament we're under grace not the law. I want to put this proposition to you. If the people of the Old Testament or the old covenant gave to support the work of God under that covenant should not the people of God in the new covenant which has greater promises, greater blessings, greater priesthood, a greater altar, a greater sacrifice should not people under the new covenant do more than people under the old covenant. It doesn't seem to me to be logical to throw it in reverse gear and say we who live under grace should give less than those who lived under law. If you add love to the law, love will always go beyond the law.

Tithing is God's will. You might say to me. "Are you saying that if I am not tithing I'm not in God's will?"

Suppose you came to me and said, "Pastor, in my work I handle the cash drawer and I've been embezzling from the company. Do you think that's out of God's will?" I would try to affirm you as a person. But would I say "I love you and I'd hate to tell you, you were doing anything wrong. I know God loves you and everything will be ok. But just don't let anybody know about it." No you would expect me as a person who knows the Bible to say, "You've got to quit embezzling. You've got to return what you've embezzled and you've got to face the music for that." You'd expect me to be honest with you from the word.

Malachi basically puts that same question to us when he says, "Will a person rob God? Will you by withholding the tithe embezzle from God?"

I would have never said that a few years ago. I wasn't quite as dogmatic as I'm getting. I really believe folks that the scriptures teach that tithing is in God's will.

Secondly about tithing, tithing permits the needs of the Lord's work to be fully met. That's why the Lord gave the tithe. He know that in the New Testament covenant he has a purpose and mission for his church to fulfill. The only way each church can fulfill its mission is if all of the people are combining together to do their part.

Malachi 3:10 puts it this way "That there might be food in my house." Is God poor that he can't make his own food? Why doesn't he just print money or make supernatural deposits in church banking accounts? Scriptures by the way tell us that God does own everything. He doesn't have to use the tithe to support his work. Psalm 24:1 says, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." Deuteronomy 10:14 "Behold to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens. The earth and all that's in it." Psalm 50:10-11 "Every beast of the forest is mine. The cattle of a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the air and that moves in the fields is mine." Haggai 2:8 "The silver is mine and the gold is mine," says the Lord who gave it." And even human life is owned by God. Ecclesiastes 12:7 "The spirit returns to God who gave it."

So everything is really the Lord's. Malachi's point is that while God owns everything he has turned totally his property over to us for our management and trusteeship. We are all leaseholders and he's the owner. What the tithe is is the lease payment.

It's humiliating to ask for payment on a note. Anybody ever lend money to a friend and they didn't pay it? Someone at arm's length you can sue to get it back. But a friend?

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That's exactly in Malachi what God is doing. God as designed his work to function on the tithe. To the extent that any one of us withholds the tithe to that extent we place limitations on what God wants to happen among us in regard to ministry. We constrain or we put a chokehold around that ministry.

We're under a curse, the scripture says, for not tithing. Not an individual curse. Not a curse like going to hell. But a curse in the sense of Jesus withering the fig tree. It was cursed and it withered. Where a ministry is not supported it withers. It can not accomplish the full strength of purpose that the Lord has for it.

I think sometimes we unknowingly and unintentionally hurt the work of the Lord. One of the ways we do that is by not tithing. Tithing is God's will. Tithing permits the needs of God's work to be met. Tithing brings a growth of our faith in the Lord.

Tithing is a practical way to grow spiritually. Malachi in fact promises the flood gates of heaven will open upon a tithing community. That promise is corporately given to the whole body. When the whole community is participating in this then God's blessing is poured out on that community and therefore even the needy within the community have their needs met out of the abundance within the community itself. Individuals are bettered.

Some have taken this from Malachi as only an individual promise. And have therefore have been disappointed when they didn't immediately strike it rich. They treat Malachi 3:6-12 as some kind of Christian Las Vegas. You put your dollar in your tithing slot and out comes two dollars. Who wouldn't tithe?

We have this problem with giving. That when we drop in money God starts to print money to send to us. But what we're dealing with in the tithe is adopting a lifestyle that brings a more disciplined approach to life and it brings a more prioritized approach to life. Tithing forces you to make a budget. It brings more discipline into your life. And anyone who is more disciplines is going to be better at whatever they do in life. As a consequence of adopting those kind of disciplines ultimately the whole of the people are going to be better off. And the needs within the body and the community are going to be met.

The tithe is fair. It has the same standard for us all – ten percent. Don't withhold your tithe if you feel it's too small, too little and therefore withhold it. Jesus specifically notes the woman who gave the little coin. He says since she gave all that she had that little bit as actually more than anyone else has given. And he values the gift for the purpose in that was involved.

Let no one tithe because they think their tithe is too little. On the other hand let no one not tithe because they feel their tithe is too large. The giving of the ten- percent is the beginning point of Christian stewardship. 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 goes on to lay down the additional principles of proportionality. A special obligation is laid upon those of greater resources to give out of their abundance. And sometimes even out of their poverty.

It seems to me the model of the Christian giving is you begin with the ten and then in incremental steps add to your faith and begin to move beyond that.

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Tithing has matured my own faith. God does somehow supply the need. Once you develop the discipline of tithing you learn actually to live better on the 90% than you lived on the 100%. You're a more disciplined person.

Scripture teaches that tithing is God's will, that it's his way of providing for ministry in his kingdom and that it will add to your faith as you do it. It's a practical way of adding to your faith. Test God and see.

Some practical implementation steps for being a tither if you're not now a tither. Of if you are maybe the Lord is speaking to you about increasing your percentage of giving.

First, settle the matter now in your heart. You are going to begin tithing. That's where the decisions of life are made. They're made in the heart.

Two, know that there will never be a good time to start tithing. Never. The only time to begin tithing is now. Begin it now.

Third, figure out what 10% is of the gross of your next paycheck or your next dividend or your next profit on a sale. Or however you receive remuneration. Ten percent of the gross. The gross and not the net. The tithe is on the total income, on the gross.

Fourth, when you get paid, make out the tithe check first. If you wait and pay your bills and then look to see if there's anything left to tithe you'll find that there's never enough. Tithing is the most strange thing. At times it doesn't make accounting sense. But if you put it first, God will supply those needs. It'll be a life of faith in the other 90%. But it has to be done first.

There's a difference between tithes and offerings. Sometimes these are taken as synonyms but they're not. Tithe is biblically mandated or required. The offering is what you give beyond the tithe. You're free to designate that

Fifth, make out a budget that tells you how you can spend the other 90% and don't be surprised if on paper it doesn't work. That's the faith element.

Sixth, if you do not see how you can tithe on your income then elders and pastors of this church are available to work with you and financially counsel you and show you how it can be done. I personally will be glad to do this. Work with one of us for three months and let us show you how you can tithe and how you can provide for your other needs. If at the end of those three months you are worse off as a result of tithing, the tithe will be refunded at your request. No risk. We believe in this as a principle of God's word.

Seventh, doesn't divide your tithe and don't designate your tithe. Malachi says "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse." Whole means an undivided portion. Storehouse means that place which is the receiving area which those responsible for the ministry then determine its disbursement. The offering you can designate and give it wherever. The tithe belongs as a whole unit in the storehouse, undisbursed. The tithe doesn't belong to a Christian publishing house, a television ministry, a radio program or ministry. It doesn't belong to a Christian college. It belongs in the local church. The offerings is for other ministries in addition to the tithe can be set at your free will.

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Another practical step is begin tithing where you are. If you're behind don't worry about catching up now. Let God prosper you.

Tithe systematically and regularly. When you're paid tithe. Don't save it up.

Increase your faith as time goes along to go beyond the tithe.

You will always be welcome in this church whether you give a dime or not. Your giving will remain always a matter between you and the Lord. But I appeal to you to become disciplined in every area of your spiritual life. Including giving your tithe and offering to the Lord's work. It's that giving which helps us to launch the ministries that are needed to reach our community.

I appeal to you as your pastor, unite with us in this year of 1988 and back this work of the Lord in your prayer, in your personal involvement, in your giving and in your commitment and let's believe God for the greatest year any of us have ever seen.

Our Lord we come to you and we indeed ask that you would move in a mighty way in this church and community and our lives personally. We realize that no great work in your kingdom ever occurs without commitment. It never occurs without prayer. Never occurs without sacrifice. It never occurs without people being of one heart and mind to give themselves to you and to your work. Lord we pray for that this year. We pray that this will be an uncommon year in every way in the life of this church in terms of its spiritual thrust. In terms of spiritual relationships among people and with you. In terms of its material needs. We pray that this year will be a banner year of advance that we at the gate of this city may hold high the light of Jesus Christ to this area. I pray for those today who come to this service and who have not in their life become disciplined tithers. I ask, Lord Jesus, that your word today will have a deep and fertile lodging in their heart and that this day will mark a difference which shall abide in their Christian walk all their life. That from here on they will set their heart and mind to follow you in obedience in this area. I ask for others who are at that point of life that they are able to go beyond the tithe and you're calling them to greater levels of faith. I pray that they would seize the moment and the opportunity. I pray for those who come to this service today whose needs go beyond that of the tithe. I ask, Lord Jesus, that your word and your help today would come as a quickening light in their life. That you would turn their bondage into freedom. That you would cause them to know that you, the Lord God almighty, have miracles that are available today, that your deeds are not simply the deeds of the past. You are the Lord not only of yesterday but today and tomorrow. I pray that they will find in you and within this church family the sufficiency and support and the encouragement and the deliverance that they need in their life. We look to you and we thank you for your grace. We remember indeed your grace. That though you were rich, yet you became poor that you through your poverty might make us rich. May blessing and glory and honor be unto your name. Through Christ our Lord. Amen. `