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## COMMON QUESTIONS ON TITHING

*THOUGHTS FROM PASTOR BRIAN AULICK*

Recently, I had the opportunity to speak with Engedi's young adults on the subject of financial faithfulness. It was encouraging to see these young leaders seeking to honor God in their finances. One of the subjects that came up in my message was the concept of tithing—giving the first 10% of our income back to God. Since I am asked regularly about this area of discipleship, I thought I would respond to a few of the common questions I hear and have asked myself.

### **IF TITHING IS PART OF THE OLD TESTAMENT LAW AND JESUS FREED US FROM THE LAW, SHOULD WE PRACTICE TITHING?**

It is true that tithing shows up in the law God gave Moses for the people of Israel (Lev 27.3-32). However, the practice of tithing actually predates the law as it first surfaces in the life of Abraham (Ge 14.20). Furthermore, in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus himself affirms tithing, though he says it's not as important as practicing justice, love, and mercy (Mt 23.23). The fact that tithing is affirmed throughout the whole of Scripture suggests tithing is a universal principle God gave us to help us understand what it means to flourish in life and to honor Him.

I view tithing similar to how I view Sabbath-keeping; I don't dismiss the practice of taking a Sabbath just because it was part of the Jewish law. Rather, I acknowledge that taking a day of rest was God's best wisdom to humanity when it comes to trusting Him and experiencing a flourishing life. So, too, with tithing: giving the first 10% of our income back to God isn't a rule we have to follow but rather a principle God gives us to live a vibrant and God-honoring life.

### **HOW DOES JESUS AND HIS GOSPEL AFFECT THE PRACTICE OF TITHING?**

Generally speaking, Jesus takes the requirements of the law and intensifies them. In the fifth chapter of Matthew, Jesus cites the law's prohibition of murder. Far from abrogating the law, Jesus says that even living with anger toward another person is a sin. Later, Jesus references the law's prohibition against adultery. He then makes clear that even looking at a woman lustfully is the same as committing adultery. One would expect that same kind of "intensification" when it comes to the practice of tithing, and that is exactly what we find. When you survey Jesus' teaching on money, it's almost always far more demanding than tithing. For example, one time Jesus asks a rich man to give up everything he owns (Mk 10.21). On another occasion, He holds up the example of a poor widow who gave the very last of her resources to God (Lk 21.2-4).

Why does Jesus' teaching on generosity exceed tithing? *Because if the law motivated Israel to give 10% to God, I believe the gospel motivates us to give beyond the tithe.* When I reflect on how Jesus gave up everything for me on the cross, my heart is changed and I want to give generously of all that I am and all that I have. This is exactly what happened in the early church. Even when early Christians were experiencing extreme need, they gave generously out of gospel-changed hearts (2 Cor 8.1-9). That's why I believe tithing isn't actually the goal of a Christian's financial life; it's more like a starting place. Tithing serves as the training wheels of Christian generosity.

### **SHOULD I GIVE TO THE CHURCH OR OTHER GOOD CAUSES?**

In the Old Testament the tithe was used to support the Jewish Temple, which was the central institution advancing God's work in the world. In the New Testament, the church replaces the Jewish Temple as the primary institution advancing Jesus' kingdom. The Apostle Paul compared the two this way: *"Don't you know that those who serve in the temple get their food from the temple, and that those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel"* (1 Cor 9.13-14). The implication is that just as the Jews tithed to the Temple previously, so should Christians tithe to the church.

But what about all of the good and important giving opportunities beyond the church? In the Old Testament context, funding for things like itinerant rabbis and the needs of the poor came from monies given beyond the tithe. In the New Testament, however, Christians entrusted their funds to the leadership of the church to be distributed strategically (Acts 2 and Acts 4). In other words, the New Testament model isn't one of individuals choosing which special projects they will fund so much as it is entrusting church leaders to wisely and strategically deploy resources.

Naturally, an approach like this presumes you're generally on-board with the kind of causes your church supports. When a church models a heart of compassion for the poor and for reaching the unreached, you can trust the leadership to invest effectively. If you're not excited about how the church engages in mission, you likely need to find another church.

Practically speaking, here's how my wife, Christina, and I have approached this question. We always start by tithing to Engedi. Our conviction is that the local church is God's PLAN A for advancing His kingdom and our giving reflects that. When it comes to our beyond-tithing giving, we still give a good portion to causes and people Engedi partners with. We understand the intentionality behind these relationships and have confidence in the difference they are making. However, we also use a portion of our beyond-tithing giving to support numerous causes outside of Engedi's local and global partners. Our experience has been, and continues to be, we simply can't out-give God.

## SHOULD I TITHE ON MY PRE-TAX INCOME OR MY POST-TAX INCOME?

In the Old Testament God asked his people to bring the "firstfruits" of their income to him (Proverbs 3.9, 1 Cor 16.2). The spiritual principle being communicated is that God is worthy and trustworthy of the very first and best part of our income. Based on this conviction, Christina and I tithed off of our gross income even in the earliest days of our marriage when we could barely make ends meet. Despite periods of severe financial constraint, God has always been faithful and we have never regretted erring on the side of generosity.

The pre-tax/post-tax question does raise an interesting heart question. Sometimes I talk with people who seem to be driven by how much of their income they can keep for themselves and still be "ok with God." Gospel-led living, however, trusts the care and provision of God and therefore is more interested in how much we can give than how much we can keep.

## HOW DOES TITHING MAKE A PRACTICAL DIFFERENCE IN YOUR LIFE?

This is one of the most important questions of all about tithing. Tithing affects your soul in a number of deeply significant ways. About covetousness Jesus said, "*Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions*" (Lk 12.15). The practice of tithing helps Christians regularly face the question, "Am I trusting in God for my happiness and joy or am I trusting in money?" Tithing helps protect your soul from greed and encourages you toward spiritual freedom in your financial life.

Tithing and beyond also positions your heart to experience greater blessing from God. The Apostle Paul wrote, "*Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work*" (2 Co 9.6,8). Those who give generously have the joy and privilege of watching God use them to make a difference in the world in ever-increasing ways.

The many benefits of tithing and beyond are what have motivated Christina and me to commit to increasing the percentage of our income we give away every year. We believe this practice is not only a good check on ever-increasing consumption, but also positions us to make an even greater difference in the world.

## FINAL THOUGHT

Perhaps you have read all of the above and are concerned it might be self-serving since the conclusions strongly affirm giving to the local church. Our greatest hope is to see you experience the joy that comes with trusting God with your finances. Therefore, if it helps ease your concerns, I would encourage you to start tithing to somewhere other than Engedi Church. God will take care of Engedi and I would love to see you discover the joy of obedience. God bless you as you step forward in financial faithfulness!



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