



Should Christians tithe?

An adequate understanding of Christian monetary tithing and giving must distinguish between the old and new covenants.

At the risk of oversimplification, the old covenant between God and Israel established a law which was intended for guidance and correction of sin among God's people. However, the law was powerless to forgive sin, and instead condemned all men and women, who, by their very nature, cannot keep the law (Romans 3:20, 8:7; Hebrews 7:18-19).

In other words, the old covenant was built on rules and rituals but not changed hearts. The Lord himself said, "this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men" (Isaiah 29:13). Thus, many moral laws were given not as the ultimate expression of God's desires for Israel, but as a concession for sinful hearts not inclined to the Lord.

The tithe was part of this law for exacting at least 10 percent of an Israelite family's money, material possessions, and livestock. These resources provided for the Levites, the priests, and the sacrificial system, upon which mediation with God depended; however, anyone could give without the proper heart.

But God planned to overcome the absence of heartfelt worship and reverence for him. He said, "I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules" (Ezekiel 36:26-27). This would be fulfilled by Jesus, God himself, centuries later.

Jesus entered the world and established a new covenant, in which he absorbed the penalty for sin, cleansed from sin those who turn to him in faith, and set their hearts to worship God in Spirit and truth, not obligation or regulation.

It was with this understanding that Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). Behind all our money and possessions lies our hearts. How we use these things, which are really from God anyway, reflects where the heart's allegiance is. "You cannot serve God and money," according to Jesus (Matthew 6:24).

This allowed Jesus to rebuke the Pharisees who tithed "mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God" (Luke 11:42). They tithed their spices, while their hearts, like those of all sinful men and women, did not actually love God. But Jesus provides a new heart and recreates the person who depends on the Cross for forgiveness of sins including hard-heartedness. All believers are "new creations," according to 2 Corinthians 5:17.

So tithing in itself is not enough. Christians are held to a higher standard, not based on their abilities or bank accounts but based on Jesus' work, which gives them a new heart of love for God. While tithing is a good example for Christians to give to God's cause, its dependence on rules rather than genuine hearts allows anyone to give without loving God or having a regenerated heart at all.

For this reason, CrossPointe does not ask anyone to give 10 percent, 20 percent, or even 100 percent of their money without a heart to match.

How should a Christian give?

Christians, then, shouldn't give money from obligation, but from a heart that loves Jesus. This was Paul's main point when he wrote to the Corinthian church concerning the financial assistance he had received from the poorer Macedonian church. He explained, "they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us" (2 Corinthians 8:5). The Macedonians gave because they were compelled by God, whom they sought first and foremost. Paul urges the Corinthian church to give in the same spirit, "not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine" (2 Corinthians 8:8). Giving, then, is a sign of love for Jesus, his work, and his people.

Jesus, after all, gave all he had—the wealth of his throne in heaven—for life on earth, having been born in a stable, living in poverty, and dying on a cross for our sins. His poverty truly makes us rich in the deepest sense. It is this example which brought about true generosity from the Macedonian church. Paul wrote, "in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own free will" (2 Corinthians 8:2-3). They weren't concerned with an exact percentage but gave generously from hearts devoted to Jesus.

A Christian, whom Jesus has saved from God's wrath, given a new heart, cleansed from sin, imparted righteousness, and made part of God's family, among other blessings, imitates Jesus by also giving generously. Giving, then, acknowledges God's grace, not a demand for sacrifice, so that the giver sees giving as a blessing, not a curse. In the end, Paul said the same thing to the Corinthians: "whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:6-7).

Why should a Christian give?

Ultimately, Christians should give generously because they love Jesus and want to be like him in all things, including their use of money; however, there are numerous specific reasons to give. Here are just a few:

- Giving is a "favor" from God (2 Corinthians 8:5)
- Jesus richly gives to his people (2 Cor. 8:9)
- Giving supplies the saints' needs (2 Cor. 9:12)
- It overflows in thanksgiving to God (2 Cor. 9:12)
- It's an act of submission to God (2 Cor. 9:13)
- It confesses the gospel of Christ (2 Cor. 9:13)
- Giving away stores up treasure in heaven like a deposit (Luke 12:33)
- God rewards those who give (Matthew 6:4)
- It furthers God's kingdom (Luke 12:31)

Paul described the Christian's service of giving as the "grace of God" for the giver, not just the recipient (2 Corinthians 9:14). He called this service an "inexpressible gift," as all believers get to give, watch God meet their needs, thank God for his provision, and pray for those who give as well (2 Corinthians 9:13-15). Giving from a sense of obligation doesn't worship God, because it doesn't come from the knowledge that giving is actually a gift itself, grace from God, that we might participate in the work of glorifying him.

Who should a Christian give to?

Christians should give to Jesus. When Ananias and Sapphira, a married couple in the early church, sold some property, they gave a portion of the profit to the apostles saying they had given all of it. "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land?" Peter said. "You have not lied to men but to God" (Acts 5:3-4). Not only had the two given falsely, but they thought they had only lied to Peter and the other apostles when they had actually lied to God.

Whatever a believer gives, great or small, must be set apart ultimately for Jesus. With this in mind, Christians can and ought to give to Jesus in a variety of ways:

- The needy, including single moms, fatherless children, the homeless, the homebound, the hungry (Luke 12:33).
- Church leadership, especially elders who “rule well” and “labor in preaching and teaching” (1 Timothy 5:17)
- Gospel-centered ministries that proclaim Jesus in word and deed
- New church plants
- The local church is the most obvious and personally vital recipient of giving. This applies to church leadership, but also to paying the church’s bills, purchasing church property, providing for members within the church who have needs, etc.

What should a Christian give? Just money? Can I give services, goods instead?

Christians should be generous with their treasure, but also with their talents and time. A believer who gives all he has to the church but doesn’t serve with his spiritual gifts or time, both of which are also allotted by God, isn’t serving the church as well as he could. Throughout his letters, Paul makes repeated references to serving the church in addition to financial means.

However, the church needs money to function. It’s not a matter of greed, but one of practicality. Using services, goods, or time as an excuse to hoard money is sin. In Luke 12:13-21, Jesus tells a parable of a man who had an excessive harvest one year. Instead of giving away what was “his,” he chose to build another barn so he could store it all for himself. Little did he know that he would die shortly after this construction project and lose all he had stored for his future. “So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God,” Jesus said (Luke 12:21).

Those with no income have no money to give, so it isn’t expected of them. But even in situations of low income, Jesus calls us to give generously. One day Jesus saw a poor widow put “two small copper coins” into an offering box while several rich men also gave money. Rather than return the money to her or condemn the woman for giving so little, Jesus said, “this poor widow has put in more than all of them. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on” (Luke 21:3-4).

Let us then give freely, generously, and joyfully, knowing that Jesus does the same to seek and save the lost.