

Defined by Generosity
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Peter Marshall, former chaplain of the United States Senate, tells a story about a man who shared with him that he had some difficulty when it comes to tithing. He told Peter Marshall, “I have a problem. I used to tithe regularly, some years ago, but...but now...I am earning \$500,000 a year, and there is just no way I can afford to give about \$50,000.” Upon hearing about this man’s spiritual dilemma, he said to the man, “I can certainly see your problem; let’s pray about it.” The two began to pray together, and Marshall, with boldness and authority, offered these words in prayer, “Heavenly Father, I pray that you will reduce this man’s salary back to the place where he can afford to tithe.” [Hamilton, p. 84]

When it comes to hearing the call to tithe, we don’t always know what to do with this directive from God. It appears that most United Methodists don’t take this directive of God all that seriously since on average a United Methodist member gives 2.2 percent of his or her income to God for the ministries in the local church. And we wonder why as a denomination we are falling behind the Pentecostals and the nondenominational churches in membership, worship attendance and programming. Members of these churches typically give to God for God to use in the church at a higher rate than mainline churches like the United Methodist Church.

Some will say [by their actions], “I make too much money to give such a large percent to God.” Others will say, “I don’t make enough, and I am already behind with the bills,” or “I’ll do more of my part when others start pulling their weight.” Still others will say, “I will tithe when I make more. I will tithe when I reduce my debt. I will tithe when I am able.” If we don’t tithe or have a plan to reach that level of giving over a few years by increasing our giving each year, then we will never get there no matter how poor we think we are or pretend to be, how much debt we have accrued living beyond our means or how wealthy we have become. Something else will take the place of the car payment when the car is paid off. Something else will take the place of tuition when the kids are out of college because we normally have our eyes set on other prizes. We have a

tendency to believe that giving a tenth is archaic, and many Christians who love God could never see themselves giving to God in this way. Yet, the poor, those on fixed income, those who have overextended their spending and those who have amassed a great fortune are all called to give a tithe. This isn't so much the Apostle Paul's idea, our bishop's idea or anyone else's idea. The idea is God's, and it actually comes as a directive from God as we read in Leviticus 27:30—"All tithes from the land, whether the seed from the ground or the fruit from the tree, are the Lord's; they are holy to the Lord." The first tenth was holy under the Law of Moses and it is still considered holy unto God today. However, many treat such a directive from God as suspicious, hearing the call to preserve the church instead of hearing the call to give for our own spiritual growth.

It is interesting, if our grandparents or great-grandparents were in church in the early 1900s, they, without question, would have given their tithe to God. In the early 1900s, tithing seemed to be the standard among Christians across denominational lines. It was expected; it was the norm. Bishop Schnase writes, "Why were they able to tithe one hundred and fifty years ago, but we have trouble doing it today? Because they were so much wealthier than we are today? The truth is precisely the opposite. We struggle with tithing because our hearts and minds are more powerfully shaped by our affluence. We find it harder to give extravagantly because our society's values shape our perceptions more than our faith's values do." [Schnase, p. 115] And if I give a tenth of my hard earned money then there is no way I can keep up appearances or do all the things that I want to do for myself.

Many in the church can't see how it is possible to tithe given all the stresses and strains we face today in our economy. We look at all of the demands on what we make: taxes take a big portion, mortgage or rent another huge chunk, savings, insurance, car payments, utilities and food. The list goes on and on, and at the end of the month many are wondering where it all went. Given our losses in this past year, we have to be extra careful how we spend our discretionary dollars, if there is even such a thing with those on a fixed income. Many view giving to God as part of their discretionary money as opposed to giving to God first. Here in lies one of the problems when it comes to our ability to tithe. If we view this portion of our income as discretionary we will more than likely discern a better use for our funds, especially if the church is meeting its budget or

the income and expenses are right on target. If we discern our giving to be discretionary then we will have a tendency to give depending on who the pastor is or what the programming is like or what the building needs of the church are as opposed to simply giving to God for God to use, for God to be at work in the lives of others through the ministries of the church.

One of the debates on the topic of tithing is whether one is to tithe one's gross income or net income. Theologians and pastors will differ in the way they respond to this. Even the two pastors that I have quoted throughout this series will differ on how a tithe is to be determined. Mike Slaughter simply asks, "Do you want a gross blessing from God or a net blessing from God?" Whereas Adam Hamilton understands that a tithe is based upon one's net income. If we take this approach, and this is the understanding that I have taken when it comes to interpreting what constitutes a tithe, then perhaps many people are far closer to giving a tithe than previously thought. Hamilton writes, "[he and his wife] subtract Social Security because we will pay tithes on these monies when we receive them. We subtract our taxes because we don't actually see this money and because we view this amount as the price for doing business here in America. If we receive a refund on our taxes, however, we do tithe this amount." [Hamilton, p. 84]

Now, I think God appreciates a tithe based on the gross or net income and I believe God blesses each person who gives, and even those who don't, in the same way blessings from God rain down upon the just and the unjust, upon the Christian as well as the atheist, those whose aim is to please God and those who fall short. We don't give believing that God will give us back an even greater portion. That seems like we are attaching strings to our giving, hoping that God will pull that string and rain down financial blessings upon us. With such an understanding to giving it seems that people are adding a bit of superstition to it—giving and hoping against hope to receive something far greater. Our giving is a means to increase our joy as we get caught up in the work of God and we have a greater sense of fulfillment and meaning in life when we see the differences that our gifts create so that we can have ministries that allow God to change people's lives.

Whatever level we are giving, God wants us to give with the correct motives. God doesn't want us to feel guilty about our giving. He doesn't want us to give

begrudgingly, hating every minute of it. We ought to give sacrificially, but I never have liked the idea that we are to give until it hurts. A better approach is that we give so much that it helps us, and such giving frees us from a tendency to be a self-absorbed, joyless people. God doesn't want us to give with a legalistic approach to giving where we say, "I am going to give based on my gross income, and I am going to give this amount because it is the right amount to give and I am just going to give it because I feel like I have to give it." No, God wants us to give out of love for God. Every time the offering plates are passed and we place a check or envelope in the offering plate, it is a great act of worship whereby we are expressing to God in a tangible way our love for God. So whether we are giving ten percent or one tenth of ten percent, we are to give out of love.

We hear a call from the pulpit to give a tithe or to grow in our giving so that one day we are giving at the level of a tithe, and this seems insulting to us. Tithing talks are the last thing we want to hear from the pulpit. [For those who are visiting today, please don't walk away thinking all they ever talk about at that church is money.] It does seem insulting, especially if we are not giving like we are capable of giving, and it may seem like an attack on our wallets and on our lifestyles, but we must remember that the teachings of Jesus rarely jell with what society deems as the norm. More often than not, following Christ in our living and in our giving is counterproductive to our pursuit of self-gratification. We live in an age of consumerism where the goal in life is to consume as much as we can, and if we are going to do this then giving a great deal to the church puts us way behind the curve. So we are surrounded by friends who are caught up in this chasing after things, and we get caught up in this ourselves. In this pursuit, in our desire to keep up with the Joneses, we have exhausted our financial resources, not with meeting our needs but with satisfying our cravings. And as David Ramsey said on a radio talk show, "We buy things we don't even need with money we don't even have to impress people we don't even know. [Dave Ramsey Show] It is sad that "forty percent of the American people spend one hundred ten percent of their annual income each year." And we try to keep sustaining this lifestyle that we have come to enjoy by going further and further into debt, and we are reaping today as a nation what we sowed with the seeds of greed, overconsumption and self-gratification in the past.

Giving to God is a great way to sow seeds for fruitful living in the future. There are many people who have overwhelming consumer debt today because they planted the wrong seeds a few years ago. Many people are reaping today the effects of poor financial decisions and wasteful spending in the past. Mike Slaughter writes, “When you have debt of any kind in your life, you are working today to pay for the past, instead of creating the future.” [Slaughter, p. 17] We read from the Apostle Paul in Galatians, “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh, but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit.” [Galatians 6:7-8]

This sermon series on discovering joy through simplicity and generosity has been aimed not at growing a church’s budget, but aimed at helping us all be in a better position both financially and spiritually in the future by planting good seeds today. We will reap tomorrow what is sown today. In order to reap a good harvest, to live well in a downside economy, we need to cultivate good habits—good investing habits, good giving habits and good spending habits where we are buying things that matter instead of giving in to wasteful spending. You will see on the blue bulletin insert a sheet of personal goals that you can set for this year. You don’t turn this in; you are only invited to turn in the estimate of giving cards. The blue sheet is another tool to use to write down on paper these goals and then seek to meet these goals by the end of next year. My prayer is that there are people who have participated in this series and have been challenged by this series that a year from now will have reduced their debt on credit cards by five thousand dollars. My prayer is that there are more people in the life of the church who will grow in their giving to God and that we will have an even greater percentage of members tithing—for this will mean we will be debt free sooner than later, and God will be able to do more work as we expand our programming for the church and community at large.

Today, we are invited to come to the altar. We come with thanksgiving in our hearts for we are receiving the tangible presence of Christ as we share in the breaking of the bread with Christians far and near on this World Communion Sunday. We come with thanksgiving in our hearts as we lay our commitments at the altar. May joy abound this day as we prayerfully give and plan for ways to be better stewards of all of our resources

and as we seek to be even more generous as we plant good seeds today in the hopes that next year's harvest will truly be great.

Resources:

Hamilton, Adam. *Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009.

Schnase, Robert. *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007, 103-123.

Slaughter, Mike. *Upside Living in a Downside Economy*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009.