

Tithing / COB / 02.14.16

- † **[Slide 1: comic]** I love when I hear one of you quoting my teachings to someone else. On the other hand, when I heard Mark quoting me as he made a joke with Lloyd about financing the pastor's Cadillac fund, I thought, "Maybe I have made that joke too often; someone is liable to believe it!" Anyway, this comic by Baptist pastor Joe McKeever made me laugh, so I wanted to share it with you.
- † There is a lot of confusion about tithing. Some people say you must give at least 10% of your income to the church or you are sinning. Others say you must give 10%, but not necessarily all to the church. Others say the Old Testament example is more like 3%, while others counter it was over 20%. Some say if you tithe then God will bless you financially, while others say you don't actually have to give or tithe at all. There is a lot of confusion about tithing in the church these days.
- **[Slide 2: tithe]** So I reckon we better look at some scripture and see what this is all about. After all, we are known as Church of the. . . Open Bible. So open your Bible to Genesis 14.
 - The word "tithe" comes from the biblical Hebrew word [תְּעֹשֶׂה], which means "a tenth." The word "tithe" means "a tenth" or "ten percent." The associated verb [עָשָׂה] means to give or receive a tithe, to give ten percent or receive someone else's ten percent.
 - **[Slide 3: Genesis 14]** We see this first in **Genesis 14.18-20 NET: Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (Now he was the priest of the Most High God.) He blessed Abram [later to be known as Abraham], saying, "Blessed be Abram by the Most High God, Creator of heaven and earth. Worthy of praise is the Most High God, who delivered your enemies into your hand." Abram gave Melchizedek a tenth [a tithe] of everything.**
 - This is our first mention of the concept. Long before the Law of Moses was established, Abram [later known as Abraham] gave a tithe back to God, through God's priest. In this case, it was ten percent of what Abraham had won in the recent battle.
 - There is no biblical indication, however, that Abraham made tithing a regular practice. Indeed, in Abraham's time period [his "dispensation," as we call it], there was no religious organization to which he could tithe regularly. I guess he could have tithed to Melchizedek, but this mysterious figure – both God's priest and king of Salem, which later became Jeru-salem – is not mentioned in Old Testament history ever again.
 - I believe Abraham would have offered first fruits and best animals as sacrifices to God – we do see examples of that in scripture – but nothing indicates this was a set percentage.
- † **[Slide 4: Genesis 28]** Turn a few pages to **Genesis 28.20-22 NET:** [This is quite a bit later.] **Then Jacob [Abraham's grandson] made a vow, saying, "If God is with me and protects me on this journey I am taking and gives me food to eat and clothing to wear, and I return safely to my father's home, then the LORD [that is, "Yahweh"; when you see LORD all in capitals, it refers to the name God gave himself, which in Hebrew is Yahweh: "Then Yahweh"] will become my God. Then this stone that I have set up as a sacred stone will be the house of God, and I will surely give you [Yahweh] back a tenth [a tithe] of everything you give me."**
- This seems to be a free offering by Jacob, but as in everything Jacob did in his youth, his attitude comes across as sinful. He says only if Yahweh fulfills his conditions will he make Yahweh his God for life; and then, as Yahweh God blesses him materially, he will give back ten percent. It is unclear how Jacob would give back, perhaps simply by offering sacrifices.

- Historically, there is nothing to suggest this was demanded by God at this time. But it is interesting that Jacob chose ten percent to give back, just as his grandfather had given the same to the priest Melchizedek. Even if regular tithing was not commanded yet, we get an impression that ten percent was some sort of understood standard.
- † **[Slide 5: Numbers 18.21]** Turn to Numbers 18.21. It is centuries later, the descendants of Jacob have been through slavery in Egypt, have been miraculously delivered by God in the exodus, and now are wandering the wilderness until God decides to give them a second chance at the promised land. During this time, God instructed Moses to write a legal code for the new nation, which would be called Israel. Tithing is mentioned several times in this legal code.
- In **Numbers 18.21 NET** God is speaking to Aaron, who was Moses' brother and the first high priest of the nation; he said: **“See, I have given the Levites all the tithes in Israel for an inheritance, for their service which they perform– the service of the tent of meeting.”**
 - The Levites were the wing of Jacob's family from which came Moses and Aaron. Initially, the Levites were responsible for guarding the tabernacle [or “tent of meeting”], and for the logistics associated with tearing it down, moving it, and setting it up properly again in the new location. They also, especially the priests among them, performed the religious ceremonies of the tabernacle. Even after the people moved into the promised land, it would be generations before they built the permanent temple, so the tabernacle would remain in use.
 - **[Slide 6: Numbers 18.22-24]** Let's read on: **Numbers 18.22-24 NET:** [God is still speaking] **“No longer may the Israelites approach the tent of meeting, or else they will bear their sin and die. But the Levites must perform the service of the tent of meeting, and they must bear their iniquity. It will be a perpetual ordinance throughout your generations that among the Israelites the Levites have no [land] inheritance. But I have given to the Levites for an inheritance the tithes of the Israelites that are offered to the LORD as a raised offering. That is why I said to them that among the Israelites they are to have no [land] inheritance.”**
 - The Levites were not granted any land in Israel. Once the people settled the land, the Levites would guard the tabernacle and eventually the Temple, and help with the logistics of tabernacle or temple ministry. Since they had religious responsibilities away from the land and God did not grant them any land, they could not support themselves. Thus the tithes of the rest of the people went to support the Levites and their families.
 - **[Slide 7: Numbers 18.25-29]** Let's read on: **Numbers 18.25-29 NET:** **The LORD spoke to Moses: “You are to speak to the Levites, and you must tell them, ‘When you receive from the Israelites the tithe that I have given you from them as your inheritance, then you are to offer up from it as a raised offering to the LORD a tenth [a tithe] of the tithe. And your raised offering will be credited to you as though it were grain from the threshing floor or as new wine from the winepress. Thus you are to offer up a raised offering to the LORD of all your tithes which you receive from the Israelites; and you must give the LORD's raised offering from it to Aaron the priest. From all your gifts you must offer up every raised offering due the LORD, from all the best of it, and the holiest part of it.’”**
 - Even the Levites had to tithe. Everyone else would give ten percent of the harvest, of whatever grains, fruits, or vegetables they harvested, and the first and best of the animals born that year. All that would go to the Levites, who then would give ten percent to the priests among them. The priests were Levites descended from Aaron, who had special religious duties. So everyone was to give ten percent in Israel, to support those who did the religious work.

† **[Slide 8: Deuteronomy 12]** Turn now to **Deuteronomy 12.17-19 NET**: [this is still part of the Law of Moses] **You will not be allowed to eat in your villages your tithe of grain, new wine, olive oil, the firstborn of your herd and flock, any votive offerings you have vowed, or your freewill and personal offerings. Only in the presence of the LORD your God may you eat these, in the place he chooses. This applies to you, your son, your daughter, your male and female servants, and the Levites in your villages. In that place you will rejoice before the LORD your God in all the output of your labor. Be careful not to overlook the Levites as long as you live in the land.**

- Once the people were settled in the land, God would specify where they should bring their tithes and other offerings. Eventually, God would command they bring them to Jerusalem [once David made it the capital] and specifically to the Temple there [once Solomon constructed it].
- When the people brought the tithes of the harvest, they could throw a feast at the temple, enjoying a communal celebration with the Levites and the others who were in the city for the same purpose. This was to celebrate that God had provided the food to last another year, a lot like the celebration our Pilgrims had with the natives, on which we pattern our Thanksgiving holiday. So part of the purpose of the tithe was to remember who blessed you with provision in the first place: Yahweh God!

† **[Slide 9: Deuteronomy 14.22-23]** Now flip a couple of pages to **Deuteronomy 14.22-27 NET**: **You must be certain to tithe all the produce of your seed that comes from the field year after year. In the presence of the LORD your God you must eat from the tithe of your grain, your new wine, your olive oil, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks in the place he chooses to locate his name, so that you may learn to revere the LORD your God always.**

[Slide 10: Deuteronomy 14.24-27] **When he blesses you, if the place where he chooses to locate his name is distant, you may convert the tithe into money, secure the money, and travel to the place the LORD your God chooses for himself. Then you may spend the money however you wish for cattle, sheep, wine, beer, or whatever you desire. You and your household may eat there in the presence of the LORD your God and enjoy it. As for the Levites in your villages, you must not ignore them, for they have no allotment or inheritance along with you.**

- Here we see fleshed out some of what I have already said: the tithe was to be 10% of what was produced each year. It could be given in kind – that is, you could give ten percent of the grain you harvested and the firstborn of your flocks – or, if that would be difficult for you to transport to Jerusalem, you could sell the produce and bring the cash instead.
- We see purpose of supporting the Levites, celebrating with some of what was brought, remembering and thanking God for his provision, and showing reverence for God.

† **[Slide 11: Deuteronomy 14.28-29]** The passage continues: **Deuteronomy 14.28-29 NET**: **At the end of every three years you must bring all the tithe of your produce, in that very year, and you must store it up in your villages. Then the Levites (because they have no allotment or inheritance with you), the resident foreigners, the orphans, and the widows of your villages may come and eat their fill so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work you do.**

- This is one of the passages that confuses people, but I don't think it need be too confusing. Twice in every seven year period, rather than bringing your tithe to the Temple, you were supposed to share out the tithe to the Levites and anyone else in need who lived in your township. It would be like instead of taking our tithe to the big celebration in Philadelphia, we

had our own celebration here in Parkesburg that year. This was part of God's economy for helping the needy: the orphans, widows, and foreigners who had no part in the land.

- The tithe helped people remember to have, and show, proper reverence for God as being sovereign over all people. Those who paid the tithe were reminded that they were giving back only a portion of what God had blessed them to have. They were reminded of their dependence on God for blessing and that not everyone was as well off as they were.
- Those who were in need, including the Levites, would find God provided for them through his people. This reminded them of their dependence on God and of God's provision for them.
- This passage also reminded all the people that under the Mosaic Covenant, God promised the blessing of fruitful harvests only if the people honored God's commands in the covenant.

† **[Slide 12: Deuteronomy 26]** Turn now to **Deuteronomy 26.12-13 NET: When you finish tithing [literally, in Hebrew, it says, "When you finish tithing all the tithe for"] all your income in the third year (the year of tithing), you must give it to the Levites, the resident foreigners, the orphans, and the widows so that they may eat to their satisfaction in your villages. Then you shall say before the LORD your God, "I have removed the sacred offering from my house and given it to the Levites, the resident foreigners, the orphans, and the widows just as you have commanded me. I have not violated or forgotten your commandments."**

- From this I want you to see that in God's eyes, the tithe was sacred; it was holy; in other words, it was separated out for his purposes, and the whole process was very important to him.

† **[Slide 13: summary]** So that is the essence of tithing. This was an agrarian community, the people mostly worked the land, so they were to give a tithe – ten percent – of whatever the farm produced back to God. If you worked in another capacity, like the Levites did, you tithed ten percent of whatever income you had. God promised them in the Mosaic Covenant, that if they were obedient, he would bless them with fruitful harvests and fruitful animals. Part of being obedient, however, was they were to give back a tithe, ten percent, of God's provision.

- Doing this would show honor and submission to God, remind you of your dependence on his provision, and provide for a celebration of that provision. It also sustained the full time religious workers, since they did not have other jobs, and it was one of several methods built into the Mosaic Law to care for the needy. That much seems pretty easy to understand.

† **[Slide 14: Proverbs 3]** Turn now to **Proverbs 3.9-10 NET: Honor the LORD from your wealth and from the first fruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled completely, and your vats will overflow with new wine.**

- Now we have controversy: is God promising that if you honor him with the tithe today, he will bring you prosperity? It depends on how you view scripture and how you view proverbs specifically.
- **[Slide 15: original circles]** As a church, we believe the Bible reveals a system of dispensations. Let me explain. We believe that God never changes, God's character never changes, God's original purposes for people – the four Rs of reflecting God's character, representing God, reproducing God's image, and ruling as God's stewards – never change;
- *but* we also believe that certain things do change, including how God develops his plan in history, how God interacts with people, and what he specifically requires of his people.

- I emphasize that we believe this because we see it in the Bible; we are getting this from the Bible, not imposing it on the Bible. Let me illustrate with our three circle model. God at the start was in authority over all he created. He made people in his own image to reflect his character, to represent him here, to reproduce his image, and to rule over the rest of the created world as his stewards. So at the start, all people, the entire human family, with a patriarch or father [like Adam] at the head, represented God to the rest of creation.
 - **[Slide 16: Israel circles]** Later, God chose one family from all people, the family of Abram or Abraham, and so then God was still in authority over all, but now it was the family of Abraham, with a patriarch [like Abraham or Jacob] at the head, who would pursue the four Rs, as they represented God to the other nations. This family would become the nation of Israel, and eventually a king, like David, would replace the patriarch as the head of the nation.
 - **[Slide 17: church circles]** After the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, God created the church when he sent the Holy Spirit to inaugurate the New Covenant blessings. So today, God remains in authority over all, and the church, with Christ at the head, is to be the image of God, pursuing the four Rs, as we represent God to the other peoples of the world.
 - Throughout history, God stays the same, God's character stays the same, God's purpose for people as his image bearers, the four Rs, stays the same, but how God develops his plan in history, how God interacts with people, and what he requires his people to do all change.
 - That is what we see in scripture. For those of you who have studied dispensations in depth, you can see that life in the Garden of Eden, life after the fall into sin and the consequent curse, and life after the flood all fit in the first of my three circles model; life for Abraham and his descendants before the Exodus and life for Israel after the Exodus fit the second model; the church age we now are in, and life in the millennial kingdom fit the third model. When Christ establishes his permanent kingdom, he will have fulfilled all three models.
- † **[Slide 18: circles and covenants]** Why am I sharing all that valuable information in a sermon on tithing? Because our beliefs about dispensations have implications for how we understand the commands and promises of the Bible; that is tremendously important as we try to live God's way.
- In the Bible, we find covenants, which are agreements or treaties that God initiated between himself and his people. These covenants specify God's promises for people and his expectations or commands for those people. The Bible says the church lives under a partial realization of the New Covenant, which replaces the Mosaic Covenant under which Israel lived. So the promises and commands of the Mosaic Covenant – the deal God had with the nation of Israel – are not necessarily the same for the church, because we have a different covenant, we live in a different dispensation, a different time period with a distinct way God is administering his people.
 - Deuteronomy, part of the Mosaic Law in the Mosaic Covenant, spelled out certain blessings and promises for the people of Israel. Some were unconditional, while others were dependent on their obedience to God's laws. It also spelled out certain curses that God would use to discipline them if they went astray, so they would come back to him.
 - None of that applies to us in the church today. So we cannot automatically think that we must obey something we find in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, or Deuteronomy, such as tithing; and we definitely should not assume that obedience will bring blessing and disobedience cursing. God chose to apply some of these things in the church age, others not. So we have to be careful.

- As I said earlier, God’s character never changes. So anything in the Mosaic Law that specifically reflects God’s character would still be valid today. Thus, we never lie, because God is truth.
 - But last year, we found that honoring the Sabbath from Friday evening to Saturday evening was no longer a valid command, though the principles behind the Sabbath – such as honoring God, ministering to others, and getting rest – all still apply today. I think we will find it is the same with the tithe, that giving 10% is no longer the specific command, but the principles of honoring God, depending on God, helping the needy, and supporting full-time ministry workers all are still valid reasons to give money to the church.
- † **[Slide 19: Mosaic Covenant]** The next question is how we should consider a biblical proverb. Much in Proverbs is simply good common sense, and we find similar proverbs in various other ancient near eastern cultures. But my belief is that the promises and threats in the book of Proverbs are related to the Mosaic Covenant which was in effect in Israel when those proverbs were written.
- In that case, when we read **Proverbs 3.9-10 NET** – written by Solomon, a king of Israel under the Mosaic Covenant – and it says, **Honor the LORD from your wealth and from the first fruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled completely, and your vats will overflow with new wine**, we conclude that command and that promise are based on the Mosaic Covenant, which required tithing in Israel and promised blessing in the nation for obedience; so it does not necessarily apply to us in the New Covenant era.
 - **[Slide 20: New Covenant]** So then we have to ask whether the command to tithe is repeated in the Bible for the church. Here’s the thing: nowhere in the New Testament is the command given to the church that we should tithe, that is that we should give ten percent.
 - We will talk about what the New Testament does teach about giving next week, but for now we should know that in all the New Testament writings and all the other earliest church writings, there is no talk of tithing – the ten percent rule – as a requirement in the church.
 - Jesus mentions tithing once in scripture. Jesus said the Jewish religious leaders under the Mosaic Covenant should have been tithing *and* doing the more important things under the Law; but that has nothing to do with us.
 - The book of Hebrews talks about Abraham’s tithe to Melchizedek, yet never mentions the church tithing, even though this was a letter written to ethnically Jewish Christians.
 - So I don’t think this command and promise in Proverbs 3 is for us. We will see an interesting promise next week that is similar, yet in an important way very different. There is a teaser to come back next week, to see what God does want us to do.
- † **[Slide 21: Malachi 3.8-9]** Let’s look at one more passage for today: turn to Malachi 3.8-12. This is one of the most misused passages in the Bible, in my opinion.
- **Malachi 3.8-9 NET:** [God speaking] **“Can a person rob God? You indeed are robbing me, but you say, ‘How are we robbing you?’ In tithes and contributions! You are bound for judgment because you are robbing me– this whole nation is guilty.”**
 - You can see a historical context here. God is talking through the prophet Malachi to the people of Israel. Israel had not obeyed the commands of the Mosaic Covenant, so God had brought curses against them, including the extreme curse of defeat and exile by a foreign power. Later, God had allowed a remnant of the people to return to the land, but they proved to be no better than their forefathers, taking God’s blessings for granted and ignoring his covenant commands.

- The book of Malachi is like a legal indictment against this remnant, proving they are not yet the people described in a prophesy by Moses at the end of Deuteronomy, that is a people who are truly God’s people led into the New Covenant by a greater prophet, later known as the Messiah. Malachi is an important book because it is historically last in the Old Testament, so it sets the scene for when Jesus the Messiah came a few hundred years later.
 - **[Slide 22: Malachi 3.10-12]** Let’s read on. **Malachi 3.10-12 NET:** [God says] **“Bring the entire tithe into the storehouse so that there may be food in my temple. Test me in this matter,” says the LORD who rules over all, “to see if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until there is no room for it all. Then I will stop the plague from ruining your crops, and the vine will not lose its fruit before harvest,” says the LORD who rules over all. “All nations will call you happy, for you indeed will live in a delightful land,” says the LORD who rules over all.**
 - God is telling the remnant of Israel who returned to the land that if they would truly return to God – that is, if they would honor the Mosaic Covenant, obey God’s laws for Israel – then God would fulfill all his covenant blessings, including fruitful harvests.
 - “Test me in this matter!” says God! God is faithful. He would keep his covenant blessings if they would follow the covenant commands. But because they were willfully disobedient, our faithful God faithfully would curse them, judge them, just as he had their ancestors, just as he also promised in the Mosaic Covenant with Israel.
- † Malachi 3.10 is often misused in that it is quoted out of context and made to seem like a command that we must tithe today and to seem like a promise that if we tithe today then God will bring us prosperity. This is a terribly false way to use scripture. In no other book would you open up to a page, pluck a sentence out of its literary context and try to make sense of it.
- This verse has a historical context and a literary context which determine its meaning: If the returned remnant of Israel would repent and begin to obey the commands of the Mosaic Covenant, including tithing, then God would honor his covenant promises, including fruitful harvests. This is about the nation Israel under the Mosaic Covenant, not about the church in the New Covenant, and it never was about individual prosperity, though sometimes God would honor his promises individually if people stood out for him amidst national disobedience.
- † **[Slide 23: comic]** Ok, how many of you have a testimony that you started tithing and God did bless you financially? Me too. But we have to be careful about using subjective experience to interpret the meaning of scripture; it works better if we use our objective understanding of scripture to interpret our experiences.
- I suggest what we experienced in those blessings was not based on Malachi 3.10 or any Mosaic Covenant promise and command, but rather God finding us faithful with a little and thus providing us more with which to be faithful. In other words, it was not an outdated promise to bless us for obeying which we experienced, but God honoring us with greater responsibility as his representatives, because we were choosing to live faithfully with what we had before.
- † In summary, I would say this. Giving ten percent of your income was long a standard for God’s people, and we should respect that, but it is not a command for the church. However, the purposes for the tithe remain true for today: we should give to the church to acknowledge our dependence on God, to show our devotion and submission to God, to provide for full-time religious workers and other costs associated with the ministry, and to help support those in need. Let’s pray...