

Oct. 18, 2009
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Growing to Tithe

Two men were shipwrecked on an island. The minute they got onto the island one of them started screaming and yelling, “We’re going to die! We’re going to die! There’s no food! No water! We’re going to die!”

The second man was propped up against a palm tree and acting so calmly that it drove the first man crazy. “Don’t you understand? We’re going to die!”

The second man replied, “You don’t understand. I make \$100,000 a week.”

The first man looked at him quite dumbfounded and asked, “What difference does that make? We’re on an island with no food and no water! We’re going to DIE!”

The second man answered, “You just don’t get it. I make \$100,000 a week, and I tithe 10 percent on that \$100,000 a week. My pastor will find me!”

For the past several weeks we’ve been engaged in our annual stewardship emphasis. This year’s theme is “Keep It Simple.” We’re called to live simply, and simply to trust in God to provide.

The first week was “Following Jesus.” Jesus calls us to consider the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. God provides for all their needs. Likewise, Jesus bids us to trust in God and let go of worry.

The second week we were “Facing the Truth.” It sounds simple to trust in God to provide, but in reality we would rather keep a tight fist of control over the destiny of our

lives. Trusting in God is counterintuitive to us. But it is really the only sure things we have.

In week three we considered “Acting Together.” Our life together as a community of Christ is centered on our mission. We love one another. As we serve in Our Savior’s name we fulfill our mission as Christ’s people.

Last week’s theme was “Sharing Enough.” Living with “enough” is a very blessed place. When we feel we have enough, then we are contented. We live out of a framework of abundance and not of scarcity. All generosity – generosity of heart, generosity of gifts, generosity of time – emerges from this most blessed place of “enough.” We have enough, enough to live and enough to share.

This week we consider the biblical mandate of tithing. Repeatedly the Bible mentions the tithe, which is giving one-tenth of our wealth as an offering. However, we fall quite short of that mark. Americans as a whole consistently have given away between 1.5% to 2% of their income. Among church goers, merely 3 to 5% who make contributions do so at the level of the tithe.

But let’s look at giving trends apart from the tithe. In a typical month, six of every ten adults will donate money to a church or other non profit. Households which give to both religious and secular organizations give over three times more than households giving only to secular causes. Religious observers give away 3.4% of their income,

while the non-religious give only 1.1-1.4%. Having a faith base does influence generosity.¹

On a whole we live quite a distance from the biblical mandate of the tithe. Our theme today is “*Growing* to tithe.” And this sums it up. Even among those who do tithe, we are all on our way to the tithe. So let us stop and consider some of the underlying principles of tithing, because the tithe is intended for our benefit. It is all for our benefit! Simply put, we give because we need to give. We don’t give towards a budget. We give because it is our spiritual need to give. Giving helps us trust in God to provide. Giving develops generous and thankful hearts. So let us consider the benefits of growing to tithe.

First of all, the tithe asks us to give our first fruits. We give from the top of our wealth, not from the dregs. When you first get your paycheck, there is a lush feeling. The check book is fat and we have money to splurge. But towards the end of our pay period, that’s when we start pinching our pennies.

Giving from the top has a very different feel to it than does giving from the bottom. We give from abundance and not from scarcity. There are also two different likely outcomes. When we give from the bottom, our thinking goes like this:

“First I’ll pay all my bills and living expenses, and then from what I have left I’ll see how much I can give to God.”

When we give to God from the top, then our thinking takes a different tack:

“First I’ll set aside this as my offering to God. Then I’ll make my life work with what remains.”

The difference between the two is this: First fruits giving puts God first. It also re-orders priorities. Life style doesn’t become an end unto itself. It doesn’t drive us. There’s something greatly liberating about that. And if the tithe is about anything, it is about our personal liberation. It’s about our liberation from mammon. It’s about our liberation from the machine. In giving to God from our first fruits, we give freely, and we receive freedom in return.

In giving freely we are released from fears. “Have no fear, little flock, for it is the Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” First fruits giving delivers us from fear.

Secondly, the tithe is fueled by deliberate giving. There is a certain romanticism around the idea of the random act of kindness. The quintessential example of that is paying for your own toll as well as the toll of the car behind you when driving through Chicago. And such acts do emit a good karma power of their own into the universe. But I’ll tell you, the things of substance come into this world by deliberate planning!

My oldest niece is a senior in high school this year. And I know that her parents have been anticipating this chapter for a very long time, since she was born 18 years ago. They’ve been planning for Allison’s college education, and their planning will pay off for Allison. There’s nothing random or spontaneous about it. It was very deliberate.

We make our offerings in a deliberate way. That’s the logic behind pledging. It’s not so much that we’re pledging to Our Savior’s Lutheran Church as it is that we’re pledging to God and to ourselves. This kind of deliberate action isn’t intended to be a heavy obligation, like making your mortgage payment is. If you lose your job or become

disabled, or some catastrophic circumstances change your financial situation, the pledge is never an obligation! The thrust of the pledge is in this vein of giving deliberately. Pledging is about the heart of our intent.

Some people will ask, “Well, should I factor things from my gross or my net earnings?” Here is my best advice. Throw that question out the window. It has no place in our deliberations. That question is driven by legalism. And legalism will render only one of two things: self righteousness or guilt.

The spirit of giving isn’t about gross or net income. It isn’t about deductions and tax advantages or disadvantages. The spirit of biblical giving is simply about the intent of our heart. We give because we want to give our thankful response to God. It’s about our intent, and that’s why we give deliberately.

Have you ever been involved in planning a super nice gift for someone you love? Maybe it’s for an anniversary or for a significant birthday. There’s a great deal of planning that goes into it. And why? Because you love that person. Our giving to God is the same way. We make plans for it because we love God.

The third thing we can learn about biblical giving from the tithe is growth giving. And this is why even people who do tithe are still *growing* to tithe. I heard once that J. C. Penny was a reverse tither. He lived on 10% of his income and gave away 90%. How did he get to that point? It wasn’t overnight! He grew into that.

Whether we have been giving at a rate of 0% or 2.1% or 11.8%, it doesn’t matter. Like the athlete running up steps at a stadium, in this life, we are all in training! No matter where we are in our giving to

God, we can all consider where we are headed.

- Have you given a dollar a week? What would it be like to give two dollars a week?
- Have you given five dollars a week ever since you came here in 1983? What if you bumped that up to ten dollars a week? That’s the cost of a meal at McDonald’s.
- Are you on a fixed income, with no Social Security increase coming next year? If that’s the case, then maybe giving at the same rate you have this year is actually growth giving.

The fourth and final thing we learn from tithing is joyful giving. Giving is a joy. It isn’t meant to be done under a sense of obligation.

In the passage we heard earlier from II Corinthians we can hear several of these principles working in tandem: “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.” In giving from our first fruits, we make our gift cheerfully in abundance. In making up our mind and giving in a deliberate fashion, we have the joy of knowing that we’re making an offering in proportion to our love of God. We can see the difference our gifts make in the world, and that is joy. Our gifts fuel mission. Our gifts help us to proclaim Our Savior’s love and serve in his name. We’re a part of that mission, and making a difference gives us great joy.

In all these things, our Lord Jesus Christ has been the biggest giver of all. He is the first fruits gift. For God so loved the world that

he gave his only begotten Son. This first born Son is the first fruits gift of our salvation. This act was planned and deliberate, ever since the beginning of the universe. And when we walked upon this earth's soil, he set his face deliberately towards the cross. His fate was deliberately chosen and his life deliberately given. And he didn't stop at giving only 10%. He has given everything. He has given all of himself for our sake. All this he did out of his deep love. To live his life in service for us, and to give his life in sacrifice for us, this was his greatest joy.

What we give as the offering of our lives can never even hope to approximate that. After what he's given there's simply nothing more *to* give. What we offer now is simply the fragrance of our gratitude. May you find great pleasure in giving your offering of thanks.

¹Giving statistics according to www.generousgiving.org