

Tithing: An Obedient Response to a Gracious God



How will you respond to God's goodness in your life?

It's your annual physical. At the conclusion of the examination and tests, the doctor says you'll be in great health if you'll do two things:

1. Reduce your calorie consumption by ten percent.
2. Increase the amount of walking you do by ten percent.

Most of us would be relieved. On average, that means cutting back 250 calories or taking only 500 more steps. That's easy!

Ten percent doesn't seem like much in most cases, but when it comes to our money, it feels huge. We know we should give to support the ministries of our church and the work of God's kingdom, but one survey showed that in 2011, Christians gave only 2.3 percent to the church—and one-third to one-half of church members don't give anything at all.¹

God has been abundantly gracious to us, and He calls us to be like Him. One way we do this is to give abundantly and graciously. In this study from the Book of Malachi, we will be challenged to see what our attitude about our money says about our attitude toward God. We will also discover the joy and benefits of giving back to the One who has given so much to us.



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SPECIAL FOCUS

TITHING: AN OBEDIENT RESPONSE TO A GRACIOUS GOD



*When did you first learn the joy
of giving?*

QUESTION 1

THE POINT

Respond to God's goodness through a tithe of your income.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

As kids, we couldn't wait for Christmas morning and the thrill of opening our gifts. As adults, I'm sure we still enjoy getting presents, but most of us discovered something perhaps even more enjoyable: *giving* gifts!

It's fun to watch the excitement in children's eyes as they open gifts. Even when adults exchange gifts, we'll see as much joy—or more—on the face of the one giving the gift. She wants to tell how she hunted for the perfect gift. He is eager to tell all the steps he went through in making the gift.

That joy of giving is not limited to Christmas or birthdays or any other "special" days of the year. God invites His people to know that joy all year round. The prophet Malachi challenged the Jews, who were missing out on this joy because they were failing to give. We are commanded to give, but as we see in Malachi's words, that command comes with great blessing. We find joy in our obedience and in our giving.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Malachi 3:7-10a (CSB)

⁷ **"Since the days of your fathers, you have turned from my statutes; you have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD of Armies. Yet you ask, "How can we return?"**
⁸ **"Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing me!" "How do we rob you?" you ask. "By not making the payments of the tenth and the contributions. ⁹ You are suffering under a curse, yet you—the whole nation—are still robbing me. ^{10a} Bring the full tenth into the storehouse so that there may be food in my house."**

We are desperate for a return to God. We need to rely on and look to God in our individual lives, in our churches, and in our communities. But, this need to return to God is nothing new. Malachi, one of the last Old Testament prophets, declared on God's behalf, "Return to me" (v. 7). The Jews had turned away from the Lord and quit following His decrees and laws. They had become lukewarm in their faith and disobedient in their spiritual practices. Thankfully, this call also came with a gracious promise: "Return to me, and I will return to you" (v. 7). They had left Him, yet God was pursuing them with a promise to be with them if they would return to Him.

A factor for returning to God and restoring their relationship with Him was to stop robbing Him! The people had abandoned God, and that was reflected in the fact they had stolen from the Lord Almighty who had given them everything: life, health, provisions, protection, and the promise of His presence. They retorted, "How do we rob you?" (v. 8).

God's answer: "By not making the payments of the tenth and the contributions" (v. 8).

"The tenth" is often referred to as the tithe. Giving ten percent is such a small amount when considering that one hundred percent of all we have is a gift from God. We may believe we have earned our wages, but who of us has earned the gift of life, our health, our minds, our bodies, or the promise of eternity? It is more proper to understand that we don't *give* a tenth; we *return* it to the Lord who has loaned us all we have. So when we don't return the tenth of what we have, we are robbing God. We are keeping from God what is rightfully His.

What have you been taught about tithing?

QUESTION 2

Throughout the Old Testament, tithing was God's plan for His people. Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek, King of Salem and priest, as recognition of God's ownership (Genesis 14:18-20)—and this was before any law about tithing was given. Jacob pledged a tenth of his possessions as an expression of gratitude for God's guidance and provision (28:20-22)—and again, this was before the law was given. The tribe of Levi served as priests; their needs were to be met through the tithes given by the other tribes (Deuteronomy 14:28-29).

Some may say New Testament Scripture never explicitly commanded giving a tenth. Even though that may be true, living under grace in Christ always takes us further than the law. Jesus identified several Old Testament commands and called His hearers to go beyond the "letter" of the law (Matthew 5:21-48).

Giving is our obedient and gracious response to God's work in our lives—and the tenth is a starting point for our giving. We do it to please Him. In addressing the matter of giving, Paul said that as we "excel also in this act of grace," we show our love for the One who gave so much for us (2 Corinthians 8:7-9).

What happens if we don't give? A lack of gracious giving reflects a selfish, stingy, and sinful mind-set. We're ineffective as long as we are self-focused and not Christ-centered. To state that in the harshest terms as Malachi did, "You are suffering under a curse" (v. 9).

What happens if we do give?

- » **We support the ministry and needs of others.** One of the main purposes of the tithe in Israel was to fund the Levites' ministry of benevolence (Deuteronomy 14:28-29). When resources were low, ministries to the poor, the widows, the fatherless, the sick, the disenfranchised, and the struggling traveler went wanting. But when the tithe flowed in, they could minister to and encourage the disheartened and downtrodden.
- » **We demonstrate our love and gratitude to God.** When we practice the spiritual discipline of giving, it multiplies the joy we have in serving Christ and benefiting others. "For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God" (2 Corinthians 9:12).

Why is obedience in the area of giving so challenging?

QUESTION 3

Why is giving such an important discipline of spiritual growth?

QUESTION 4

Malachi 3:10b-12 (CSB)

^{10b} "Test me in this way," says the LORD of Armies. "See if I will not open the floodgates of heaven and pour out a blessing for you without measure. ¹¹ I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not ruin the produce of your land and your vine in your field will not fail to produce fruit," says the LORD of Armies. ¹² "Then all the nations will consider you fortunate, for you will be a delightful land," says the LORD of Armies.

God challenges us to "Test me in this way" (v. 10). This is not a dare from God; it is an invitation from the Almighty to follow His plan and reap the benefits of obedience. When we take God up on this test and give obediently, He does two things for us:

- » **God provides.** God promised He will "open the floodgates of heaven" (v. 10). As we bless others through giving our tithe, God blesses us.

Of course, we are not to give simply because God blesses us. We do not give to get. You've surely heard a charity encourage you to give because "it will make you feel good." Indeed, giving to help others can create a good feeling, but if this is the primary incentive, it is essentially a selfish motivation. As noted earlier, we are to give out of gratitude, a response to God's graciousness to us.

- » **God protects.** God's blessing includes His favor on the crops, vines, and the fruit produced by all who follow His



principle of stewardship. "I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not ruin the produce of your land and your vine in your field will not fail to produce fruit" (v. 11). Physical drought can be devastating to a farmer. Likewise, spiritual drought can be deadly to a believer in Christ.

The Jews hearing Malachi's words knew God desired to bless and protect them. Years earlier, when the people were in exile in Babylon, God promised to protect them and bring them back to a prosperous place. "For I know the plans I have for you"—this is the LORD's declaration—"plans for your well-being, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope" (Jeremiah 29:11). His protection was tied to their trust in Him. "You will seek me and find me when you search for me with all your heart. I will be found by you"—this is the LORD's declaration—"and I will restore your fortunes" (vv. 13-14a).

When we trust God, He works on our behalf and in His timing—timing that is always perfect.

God's promise of protection has not changed. Our generous giving is a reflection of our trust in Christ, and as we trust Him, He is with us and protects us. For the Christ-follower, nothing can separate us from God's love and presence (Romans 8:31-39).

When we give, God responds—and others notice God's work in our lives. Malachi gave a strong motivation to the Israelites to return to tithing. "Then all the nations will consider you fortunate, for you will be a delightful land." The blessing of God is contagious; it touches those closest to us and others who are desperate for relief see it and want in on it too.

Obedience always brings blessing. My family raises and trains Labrador retrievers. When a potential new owner comes to "check out" the pups, the first question is usually, "Which one behaves the best?" Obedience is learned through experience—and many times through the consequence of disobedience.

Unlike dogs, we're not called to obedience in the area of giving merely for an anticipated reward. We give as a loving response to what God has already done for us!



What are the benefits of Christian giving in the life of the church?

QUESTION 5

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot
keep to gain what he cannot lose."

JIM ELLIOT

STEWARDING GOD'S MONEY



Consider your own monthly spending habits. On the pie chart below, estimate the percent of your monthly income you spend in the following areas: tithe, housing, food, transportation, fixed expenses, debt, and so on.



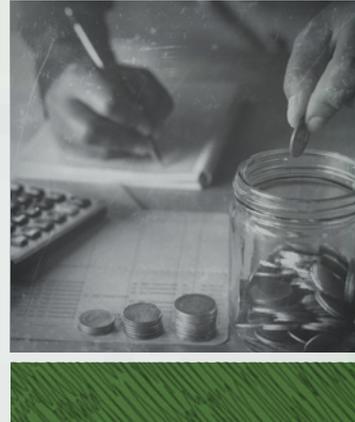
Is your current level of giving where you'd like it to be?

If it's not, what areas would you like to change to be able to give more to God's kingdom?

LIVE IT OUT

How will you live out the truths found in Malachi 3:7-12?

- » **Start.** If tithing is new to you, it may take some time to work up to a full tithe. Set some goals over the next twelve months that will eventually get you toward tithing ten percent. Pay attention to how this spiritual discipline transforms your thoughts toward giving.
- » **Share.** If you are currently tithing a full ten percent, spend a little time considering how God has worked through your tithing journey. Be prepared to share with someone how being generous has affected you spiritually.
- » **Strengthen.** Tithing is about freedom in responding to God's work in your life. Consider ways you can exceed your usual tithing practice by giving above and beyond toward God's work.



Don't miss out on the benefits of giving back to God. **When we tithe, we get to participate in God's kingdom work and we experience firsthand the joy found in obeying Him.**

My thoughts



A HOMELESS MAN THREW AWAY MY SANDWICH

BY BRANDON HILTIBIDAL

One time a homeless man threw away my sandwich.

I offered the sandwich, he flung the sandwich, and I never saw serving the same. It was just one moment and one guy and one sandwich, but it shaped the way I served for years.

I was involved in a young adult group that prepared and packaged PB&Js for homeless people once a week. Most of the sandwich recipients were grateful for the generic grape and off-brand creamy on white that we wrapped up and passed out downtown.

Most, but not all.

They all had troubled pasts—bad decisions, drug dependencies, or broken minds. But some responded to the gift with gratitude, while others threw the sandwich on the ground and made demands.

This instance, my most problematic PB&J exchange ever, made me wonder if we should just leave the homeless alone. I was handing sandwiches to a large group of guys and several said “thanks.” But one, immediately and angrily said, “Man, I don’t want this.” Then, he fiercely flung it at the trash can nearby (he missed) and said, “You got any money?”

Wait. That’s not how this is supposed to work, right?

So a sinner rejected my sandwich. This guy was homeless, but he trashed my snack and asked for cash I didn’t have.

I felt like a failure.

Then, I felt angry.

And then, I stopped serving sinners.

Loving bad people can be frustrating. Serving sinners who waste your work can feel like a waste of time. As leaders, positioning our groups to shape culture through gospel-fueled acts of service is challenging, especially when the people we serve need to be served because of their own sin.

*Jesus sees someone
working for something
they can only
find in Him.*

I’m sure your group has faced the questions, “Whom should we help?” “Whom should we love?” “Whom can we trust not to use us and waste our work as we try to be like Jesus?”

Will our group serve bad people? I’ve certainly asked this question. I mean, a homeless man wasted my sandwich.

Thank God Jesus isn’t like me.

We see people who are homeless and we judge their circumstances. But Jesus sees a heart He wants to bring home. We see dads with no relationship with their children because they were bad fathers. Jesus sees a son He wants to save. We see co-workers lose their jobs because of dishonesty or selfish ambition. Jesus sees someone working for something they can only find in Him.

In those types of circumstances, we often don’t



really want to help. We ask, "Who sinned?"

He wouldn't be homeless if he wasn't a sinner. He would have a family if he wasn't a bad person. She would have a job if she wasn't wicked.

Who wants to listen to those people?

Who wants to help?

Jesus does. Jesus wants to listen. Jesus wants to serve.

"None is righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10).

"While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

*We have all squandered
grace, yet still we
are loved to the
depths in Christ.*

Jesus serves even though we've all thrown sandwiches. If Jesus only listened to the needs of people who deserved none of the blame for their problems, He'd never listen to anybody. If Jesus only helped with the hurts of the innocent, He would never help anyone and would never have left heaven in the first place.

But Jesus listened and Jesus served and Jesus loves. Let your group serve bad people. It's not a waste; it's a picture of the gospel. We have all squandered grace, yet still we are loved to the depths in Christ.



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