

Should Christians Tithe?

Wealth and the Kingdom of God

The Bible frequently mentions money, wealth, and the material world¹. Jesus, during his earthly ministry, addresses the subject often². We can conclude that our interaction and relationship with money has significant spiritual implications. Sadly, it seems as if some ministries and preachers have taken this to mean that wealth is the primary concern of the Kingdom of God. In a day where unbiblical teaching about finances and the material world is pervasive, the need for sound, biblically-rich truth concerning money is desperately needed.

Stewardship

The Kingdom of God has little to do with money, but everything to do with *stewardship*. God calls his children to be wise stewards of everything in their life—including money. Stewardship describes a worldview that says our lives and possessions are gifts entrusted to us by God to be used for his glory and the good of others. Stewardship is in stark contrast to the worldview of *ownership*—which assumes our lives and possessions belong to us alone and we can use them in any we wish.

Many dismiss the concept of stewardship because they wrongly assume that God is forbidding them from enjoying anything to do with the material world. But God-honoring stewards are led to enjoy the material world in a *much deeper* and satisfying way. Stewards do not look to the material world as the source of their joy, hope, and fulfillment; they look to Jesus. This frees their hearts to view and enjoy the material world, giving thanks to God for what he has entrusted to and provided for them, in a way that those who reject God's authority and goodness are not able to. The ownership view of life places expectations on the created world that it is unable to meet or fulfill. God has designed life in such a way that his presence alone can truly satisfy and meet our deepest desires and expectations. When looking at the Scriptures, the concept of stewardship becomes increasingly clear.

Our Savior was the example of a perfect steward. Jesus left his home in heaven, full of riches and glory, to live in poverty and humility on Earth. He used his life to glorify the Father and bring salvation to sinful humanity. In John 17:4, Jesus says that he accomplished *all* the work the Father had given him to do—the perfect steward. Jesus became the most generous giver in history as he suffered upon the cross. He took our sin and gave us his perfect life. He takes our death and gives us his life. He takes our punishment and gives us salvation. Upon his return to heaven, Jesus continued to give. He gives us the Holy Spirit and provides spiritual gifts for his church. Although we will not be perfect in our stewardship, we should still strive to follow Christ's example and steward our lives and possessions for God's glory and the good of others.

We belong to the Lord. Romans 1:6 states they we are called to "belong to the Lord." Simply put, our lives are not our own. God is the only person who can rightfully have the ownership view of creation.

¹ Money is mentioned over 800 times throughout the Bible

² At least eleven of the thirty-nine parables Jesus taught were concerned with how to handle and view money and possessions. Jesus directly speaks of wealth and money, or money is spoke of in connection with Jesus, more than twenty-five times throughout the four Gospel accounts. Jesus also frequently speaks of "treasure" throughout those books.

Everything belongs to the Lord. The Bible recognizes the ownership of property by individuals, which is one of the reasons it forbids stealing, but ultimately points to God as the owner and sustainer of *everything*. The Bible says that all financial wealth is his³, all resources that lead to wealth are his⁴, and even the skills that allow humanity to work for wealth are his⁵.

Stewardship as worship. For most of humanity, we will either worship wealth and the created world, or the God who owns and created that world. This is the main point Jesus is making much of the time he addresses money and possessions. We will either worship wealth, or worship *with* our wealth. Stewardship assumes that our lives and everything belongs to the Lord, and seeks to use it to point our own and others' hearts towards treasuring God. Our use of money points to what we truly worship.

A compelling case for stewardship. The Bible makes a compelling case that pushes us towards the stewardship view of life. As Christians, Jesus is our treasure—we do not need to take part in the idolatrous pursuit of the created world to satisfy us⁶. The Bible also lets us know that more stuff won't make us happier⁷. To focus our lives on the accumulation of "stuff", hoping it enriches our existence and keeps us from wasting our lives, is an exercise in futility. Jesus also directly states that, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."⁸ A joyful life is one where a person generously stewards their wealth and possessions. God, who is the most generous giver in the world, is also the happiest. Furthermore, when we act as generous stewards, we are storing up treasures in heaven⁹. This is not saying that earthly treasures are bad, but that they won't last. However, treasures in heaven cannot be stolen, taken away, and will last forever.

Children of God are called to steward our lives, possessions, time, decisions, families, thoughts, words, strengths, and gifts. In other words, we are called to be wise stewards concerning *all* of life. And it has little to do with this present world. Although being a wise steward will result in a more enjoyable life, it is primarily about our *eternities*. The spiritual is always ahead of the physical—wise stewards recognize and live in the light of this truth. Understanding this, a wise steward knows the most important thing they steward is the gospel of Jesus Christ. What they do with that message, and how they allow their salvation to shape their lives, are the most important decisions they make.

Where Does Tithe Fit In?

Tithe, literally meaning "tenth," is an Old Testament term that referred to the giving that God's people were commanded to provide in support of the Levite priests' ministry¹⁰. They were directed to give the first 10 percent of their income, also called "firstfruits." In addition to the first 10 percent, other tithes and offerings were required of God's people throughout the Old Testament. They were told to give towards celebrations and practices that built community and proclaimed what God had done in their lives¹¹. They were also commanded to give in ways that would help the poor, foreigner, and sojourner¹². When all the various areas of mandatory giving are added up, God's people would have given around 25 percent of their income for ministry purposes.

³ Haggai 2:8

⁴ Psalms 50:10

⁵ Deuteronomy 8:17-18

⁶ Romans 1:21-23

⁷ Ecclesiastes 5:10

⁸ Acts 20:35

⁹ Matthew 6:19-21

¹⁰ Numbers 18:21-29; 27:30

¹¹ Deuteronomy 12:10-14

¹² Deuteronomy 14:29; Leviticus 19:9-10

Moving on to the New Testament, the word *tithe* is barely used. And when it is, the context is usually negative and connected to a rebuke¹³. Rather than mentioning the tithe, New Testament examples of giving¹⁴ focus on stewardship, grace, generosity, sacrifice, the heart, and the motivation for giving rather than percentages. The gospel unleashes grace into the hearts of believers that lead them to give much more than ten percent of their income. It leads them to give God their *hearts and lives*. It is not about how much we must give to God, but how much of what God has given us do we need to keep? Rather than focus on percentages, we should orient our giving around the principles found in the New Testament that inform us how we can give *generously*. The most thorough teaching regarding New Testament giving is found in Paul's letters to the church at Corinth.¹⁵

Giving is sacrificial.¹⁶ Paul talks of followers of Jesus who, although they were going through severe affliction and hardship themselves, were still generous and gave in a way that would have required sacrifice and selflessness. Additionally, in several examples that Jesus gave concerning Christian giving¹⁷, he points out the sacrifice being made by the giver.

Giving is a spiritual gifting.¹⁸ For some in the body of Christ, being a generous giver will come easy and quite naturally. Being generous seems like an obvious aspect of discipleship to them, and generosity will flow from their lives. This is in large part because those persons have been given a gift from God enabling them to be generous and cheerful givers. For others, giving generously will need to be something that is taught and modeled to them. It will require a bit more discipline and intentionality on their part to faithfully live out being a wise and generous steward. Additionally, those who have been given a gift that helps them be generous should not disparage or condemn those whom giving does not come as naturally to. They should come alongside them and help them understand the biblical view of stewardship and generous giving.

Your own personal giving motivates others in the Kingdom of God to give generously.¹⁹ When fellow believers see you being generous, and vice versa, it motivates and encourages the body of Christ to be generous. While Christian giving is not motivated by the desire to be seen and applauded, Jesus does make the example of a widow woman giving all she had a public matter²⁰. He knew that this account would inspire and convict. We should never give with our focus primarily on what it will look like to others, but sometimes the Lord may use your faithfulness to inspire others to be generous. While giving may seem like a deeply personal matter, it is more joyful and meaningful when we do it together in community. When a body of believers comes together to give towards ministry or a specific need, there is a sense of belonging, cooperation, and teamwork that results in the glorification of God.

Giving is about the gospel.²¹ Not only does our giving reflect and point others towards the God who gave his life for the salvation of others, it is a way for the gospel to take deeper root in our own hearts and lives.

Giving helps support churches.²² Generous giving recognizes that some of the abundance of wealth and possessions one may have has been entrusted to them so they can support the growth of the Church. This

¹³ Matthew 23:23-24

¹⁴ Mark 12:41-44; Matthew 6:1-5; Matthew 10:42; Matthew 5:40-42; Acts 2:45; Matthew 26:7; Acts 4:34-37; Philippians 4:8; Luke 19:1-9; Luke 10:29-37

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8-9

¹⁶ 2 Corinthians 8:1-5

¹⁷ Mark 12:41-45

¹⁸ 2 Corinthians 8:7; Romans 12:6-8

¹⁹ 2 Corinthians 9:1-2

²⁰ Mark 12:41-45

²¹ 2 Corinthians 8:8-9

²² 2 Corinthians 8:13-15

directs wise stewards to give to those who are seeking to plant new churches, establish churches where none exist²³, and to existing righteous churches that may be going through a season of struggle and financial hardship.

Giving should be consistent.²⁴ Generous givers are not “hit-and-miss” when it comes to their giving. Rather than being led by inconsistent impulses and impressions, generous giving seeks to be faithful and consistent. God wants us to be thinking of and aware of our stewardship often—not just on some sporadic occasions. This would lead us to give and practice wise stewardship on a regular basis. It also communicates that we cannot truthfully and biblically come before God and others in worship without examining what our treasure is and if we are being wise stewards of all that God has given us. Without being legalistic about the regularity, believers should prayerfully and thoughtfully consider what regular giving means for them based on how God is daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly prospering them.

Giving provides for those who teach you the Word of God.²⁵ God calls many to serve his church through the labor of teaching and preaching. For some, God calls them to forgo gainful employment in their community so they can give themselves fully to the task of teaching, preaching, and shepherding God’s people. When God’s people recognize those whom God has called to such a task, and seek to provide financial support for them, they can be assured they are lining up with the Word of God.

Giving is about sowing and reaping.²⁶ Some wrongly encourage Christians to give to God so that they might get money and material in return—a damaging and unbiblical interpretation of sowing and reaping. Rather, through our giving we sow into ministries that preach the gospel and get to be a part of people’s lives being changed by Jesus. When we use our money and material to ensure that the gospel goes forth and people meet Jesus, we reap a satisfaction in our souls that mere material could never provide. For those who steward their money this way, focusing on the Kingdom of God first and foremost, Jesus promises he will provide for and meet all their earthly, physical needs²⁷.

Giving is a cheerful act.²⁸ God does not desire our begrudging submission—he wants joyful obedience. For some, they cannot begin to understand how followers of Christ can be cheerful when giving their money away. Generous givers understand that money isn’t their treasure, Christ is. This enables them to be cheerful in their giving because they know their generosity will magnify Jesus and help others come to know him. Knowing that you are participating in God’s redeeming work in the world fills your soul with deep and lasting joy.

Giving requires you to make some decisions.²⁹ How much we give is up to us. We are to voluntarily and willingly give the amount that we personally determine. The concept and wording of “decided in our heart”, found in 2 Corinthians 9:7, does carry with it the idea of thinking through how much we are to give beforehand. In other words, it is something we deeply consider and think upon instead of simply acting on an impulse.

²³ This is what God has called missionaries to do all around the world.

²⁴ 1 Corinthians 16:1-5

²⁵ 1 Timothy 5:17-18; Galatians 6:6; Matthew 10:10; 1 Corinthians 9:8-14

²⁶ 2 Corinthians 9:6-12

²⁷ Matthew 6:33

²⁸ 2 Corinthians 9:7

²⁹ 2 Corinthians 9:7

Giving the Wrong Way

The New Testament teaches us that simply because we are giving money away does not mean we are being obedient to God and acting in a manner that is pleasing to him. There are ways that Christians can give that do not please God or help them spiritually grow.

Giving reluctantly.³⁰ If each time we are giving there is a sense of reluctance, grief, sorrow, or remorse, then we are giving in a disobedient manner. We're still giving, but we may be sad about it. We know we should and we know it is right, but we are not happy in doing it. Despite the action of giving, this behavior does not please God or benefit the giver. A person would be better off keeping their money until their heart and attitude has changed about giving. For some, this should be a matter of asking God to do a work in your heart that helps you give joyfully and deeper understand the gospel.

Giving under compulsion.³¹ Giving under compulsion, because we feel like we "owe" God ten percent, damages our spiritual lives. We are not to give because somebody told us to, others are doing it, or because we have been coerced. Paul, in his own life, goes to great lengths to ensure that he is not placing a burden or compulsion upon people to give³². God desires that our giving come from a heart that voluntarily chooses to give rather than one that gives because we should or are supposed to.

Giving to be seen.³³ When we give for accolades, or to impress others, Jesus lets us know that this type of giving is not something that God the Father will reward. Giving in this way devalues the Kingdom of God, needy people, and other righteous occasions for giving. It places oneself as more important than what their giving may be going towards. Being able to give towards something meaningful, that matters to God and to the advancement of the gospel, should be reward enough. There should be no need for anyone to recognize and applaud us. This type of giving also assumes that people's opinion and view of us, which are important in some regards, are more important than what God thinks of our actions and hearts.

Giving to heretical and false teachers.³⁴ God values truth and expects his people to discern which ministries are worth supporting. Some tragically proclaim teaching that does not honor God or lead its hearers to a biblically sound understanding of life, church, the gospel, or God himself. And they do it in the name of Jesus. When we support the spread of lies that are taught as biblical truth, we dishonor God and his Word. These ministries often promise those who give that they will receive material wealth if they support them. This type of teaching has, and continues to, hurt many people while often taking advantage of the poor and needy. God expects his children to be able to discern these false teachings and not give the finances he has entrusted to them to support lies and the lives of those who teach them.

Giving like a single person when you are a married. The covenant of marriage requires unity, agreement, and teamwork. While it is true that God has given men and women separate and distinct roles within marriage, married couples should agree and be respectful of each other's opinions and feelings in regards to what they give.

³⁰ 2 Corinthians 9:7

³¹ 2 Corinthians 9:7

³² 1 Corinthians 9:1-18

³³ Matthew 6:1-4

³⁴ 2 John 10-11; 2 Thessalonians 3:6

Stewardship is About More Than Giving

When we assume that being a wise steward only concerns the finances we give to our church and other places that advance the Kingdom of God, we misunderstand a crucial aspect of stewardship. We are called to be wise stewards of *all* our lives and *all* our finances. It is possible to give in a biblically-sound manner and still not be a wise steward. There are some who do give cheerfully, sacrificially, and voluntarily, but could not be considered wise stewards because they do not manage the money they *keep* in a wise way. This involves unnecessary debt, allowing material to shape your identity, not planning for your financial future, not providing for your own family, not paying bills, supporting ungodly things, and other unwise financial decisions. We must not only think about the money we give, but also the money we spend or save. Unwise stewardship puts us in a position that limits our generosity and ability to grow in our giving. We may desire to give to a certain person or area of ministry, but are unable to do so because of poor stewardship.

Jesus Said It Best

“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”³⁵ The way we view and handle the material world is an evidence of our salvation. If someone has truly received the grace of God through the gospel of Jesus Christ, they will be generous. They will use material and money to glorify God and help people rather than use people and material to satisfy and bring glory to themselves. Their identity will be shaped by the gospel and the Word of God instead of their income, bank account, the size of their home, what kind of car they drive, or what clothes they wear.

Jesus offers us an alternative, through faith in his sacrificial death, to the consumerism, greed, and covetousness that is a normal part of our culture. The gospel can transform our hearts and identities in such a profound way that it causes us to view the material world in a drastically different way than most in our culture. Our world desperately needs to see those that have been transformed by the gospel humbly live in a way that is marked by generosity, hospitality, and compassion—in a way that places the eternal ahead of the temporary. Let there be no confusion about who we are truly serving.

³⁵ Luke 16:13