

Give in Faith (contd)

The Peace of God Part 14
Philippians 4:15-19 7/1/2017

Introduction

Do you know what a white elephant gift is? It's a gift that's useless and a pain to store, but that you can't get rid of. It came from the kings of Thailand, back when it was called Siam. There are elephants in that part of the world that are white. And in those days, any time a white elephant was discovered, it instantly became the property of the king. They were considered sacred, and for that reason they could never be sold or put to work. But they were incredibly expensive to care for.

There were times, if someone fell out of favor with the King, as a punishment, the king would give that person a white elephant. That was a punishment because they couldn't get rid of it, they couldn't use it, and so it would quickly make them bankrupt as they struggled to care for it.

That's what our money becomes when we fall in love with it. It's fine if you just use it, but when it becomes sacred, it becomes a white elephant. You can't get rid of it, because your heart is wrapped around it, but it drains your resources just trying to maintain it. And it ends up destroying you.

How Much to Give

So, how much should you give? I've talked in general terms – be generous, be sacrificial, etc. But what does that look like in practice? How much of your income should you give? What about when you're in debt? Or when you don't even have enough to pay your bills each month?

Tithe

Here's what I believe the Bible teaches: The starting point is a tithe – 10% of your gross income, before taxes are taken out. I say before taxes, because we want to give to God first, not to Uncle Sam first. First fruits, just like Abel – give God the first and the best.

I realize some people teach that the tithe was an OT law that isn't for us today, but I don't agree with that. Tithing existed before the mosaic law. Abraham gave a tithe in Gn.14. Jacob gave a tithe in Gn.28. Three different places in the Mosaic Law God regulates the tithe.¹ And Jesus said that we shouldn't neglect the tithe in Mt.23:23. It's true that Jesus fulfilled the law, but I don't see anything in the death and resurrection of Christ that would indicate that the baseline minimum for how much of our income should be given directly to God in worship is now decreased. In fact, just the opposite. The purpose of the tithe in the Mosaic Law was to support the priests. And in 1 Corinthians 9 Paul refers to that as the basis for why preachers should be supported full time.

¹ We never see a tithe or offering commanded until the Mosaic Law. There are three major passages in the Law about the tithe Lv.27, Nm.18 and Dt.14. By the time you get to the period just prior to the birth of Christ (they call that the intertestamental period, because it's the 400 year period in-between the end of the OT and the beginning of the NT), the Jews had interpreted these as three separate tithes. So they said you had to give 30%. They came to that conclusion because of what they perceived as differences in the tithe laws in those passages. For example in Leviticus tithe is to support the Levites and Priests, and in Deuteronomy it's to be eaten by the worshipper. But most likely there was just one tithe, and those apparent differences are not really differences. When Dt.14 tells the people to eat the tithe on their crops, it doesn't mean eat it all. That was just a single meal – but in the very next verse it says and do not neglect the Levites living in your towns, for they have no allotment or inheritance of their own. (v.27) When God gave the Promised Land to the Jews, He divided it up among all the tribes but one – the tribe of Levi. They didn't get anything. And they couldn't do anything to earn a living, because they spent their full time in ministry. So God instituted the tithe to support them (and every third year to support the poor as well). That was the purpose of the tithe that was commanded in the Law.

1 Corinthians 9:13 Don't you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? 14 In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.

He says the reason preaches should be supported is because in the OT the priests were supported. And they were supported with the tithe. If it took 10% of everyone's money to support the priests, it makes sense it would take that much to support pastors today.

And even if the tithe isn't for our day, if God says to give whatever is in our heart to give to worship and honor him and express our love for him, and we say, "Ok, here's 2%," how would that reflect an age of greater grace? If we have more grace today, we would expect even greater and more effusive expressions of love for God, not less. 1 Cor. 16:2 commands that we give an amount commensurate with our income. Giving 2 or 3 percent is not commensurate with your income. In OT times, on top of that 10%, people would give freewill offerings. So it ended up being more than 10%. So 10% really was just the baseline floor. In Luke 12:33 Jesus commanded us to sell our possessions in order to have more to give to the poor. If you have to sell something to get the money, obviously you're giving beyond 10% of your income. We see people in the book of Acts selling property and putting all the money in the offering.

Serving Instead of Giving?

Another excuse people come up with is, "Instead of giving, I serve. I give of my time, rather than money." As if God gave us the option: "You can either serve me or give – pick one." The Bible never says that. What it does say is that we should serve and give. And you can't justify disobedience in one area by the fact that you're obeying in another area. "It's ok if I commit adultery, because I make up for it by not stealing." That's not how obedience works.

And think of the logic of that kind of reasoning. When people say, "I serve in the church instead of giving," the logic behind that is God really should be paying me for this work. But I'll let him keep what he owes me for it, which is like I'm giving him money, so we're even. Can you see how ridiculous that is? What if you flipped it around and some rich person said, "No, I don't ever serve the body of Christ with my spiritual gift. I just give money instead. Here – here's a check, double the normal amount. Now I don't have to come to church for a month.

Beyond the Tithe

So all that to establish that I do believe we should tithe. But it does leave us with the question: Why is the tithe mentioned only one time in the NT? Jesus said not to neglect it, and that's the only time in the whole NT that we hear about it. How many times does Jesus have to say something for it to count? Once! So we need to obey it, but still, why is it not emphasized more?

To answer that you can just look at what is emphasized with regard to giving. What the NT emphasizes most are the motives behind giving, the promises associated with giving, and the joy connected with giving. God didn't want our giving to mainly be based on following a rule. He wanted it to rise up out of faith and love and worship and passion for the gospel. That 10% figure still sits there as a baseline minimum to help us gauge whether something is wrong with our faith and love and worship and passion. If I'm freely giving whatever is in my heart to give and it comes out less than a tithe, something's way off in my heart. But if God would have just focused on the tithe, the focus would have been on the minimum and would have promoted limitation rather than liberality.

Not Grudging

Guilt-driven giving is reluctant giving, and that's exactly the kind of giving that God doesn't love. The right way to give is out of overflowing joy. The wrong way to give is described in the next chapter.

2 Corinthians 9:5 ...Then it will be ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given. 6 Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. 7 Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

Not grudging, not sparing, not reluctant, not under compulsion – what do all those have in common? They all come out of a heart that wants to keep the money rather than a heart that wants to give it. Some external pressure pry's the money out of their hands, but their heart is clutching it. That's money God doesn't want, and so if this study tonight causes that kind of giving to happen, it will be an abysmal failure.

Giving for Reward

Kant convinced our culture that an act is only morally virtuous if you get nothing out of it. I called that a stupid philosophy. The reason I say it's a stupid philosophy is that it doesn't allow for you to love doing good. Suppose you help an old lady across the street, and you do it because you love showing kindness. And someone else helps a lady across the street, but that guy hates showing kindness. He gets no enjoyment out of it at all, but he forces himself to do it anyway. According to Kant's philosophy, the guy who doesn't like helping people is more virtuous than the guy who loves helping people, which is ridiculous. Virtuous people are people who not only do good, but who take delight in it.

So if you help an old lady across the street, and it doesn't benefit you in any way, then that's a truly good act. But if you get some benefit from it, then that ruins it and you're really just being selfish. So it's not really virtuous unless you get nothing out of it. If a woman asks her husband to do something, and then says, "If you do that, I'll make you the happiest man in the world tonight," and he says, "I'm not motivated by that. I'm so virtuous and selfless, that your offer has no impact on me, no tug on my heart at all. I'll do the favor for you, but not because of what you offered to me. I'll just do it because I have so much intrinsic virtue and goodness that I need no external motivation." If he said that, it would be an insult to his wife. And if we treat God's promises of reward that way, it's a slap in his face.

And if we think we are doing good because we are filled with intrinsic righteousness and goodness, we're really in a fantasy land. Everyone who ever does good does so for some kind of reward. It might be the reward of feeling good about themselves, or other people liking them, or a sense of accomplishment, or enjoyment of putting a smile on someone's face – but one way or another, we do it because of a desire for something. Only God is intrinsically good.

Why would we snub God's offers of reward? Does God want us not desire heaven? Should we not want to hear God say, "Well done, good and faithful servant"? It would be impossible to love God and not desire those things.

What is the Heavenly Reward?

When I say that Paul was excited about the Philippians' getting credit to their account in heaven, it sounds like religious babel – the kind of thing a pastor is supposed to say, but that doesn't have a lot of meaning. But for Paul, this was really true. It really did affect him emotionally more to realize that someone he loved had just accrued more reward in heaven than to get a jackpot of money. It boosted his mood. It motivated him to work and to be willing to suffer – to be willing to risk being beaten to death. That's how real it was for him, and he expects it to mean just as much to us – that's why he writes it.

Paul lived to beef up the IEA accounts of as many people as possible. He wanted to fill them to overflowing – but with what? What is it, exactly that goes into these accounts? We don't know exactly – all we have to go by are the comparisons and analogies that Jesus gave us to describe our rewards. For example, several times Jesus compares that reward to being like money.

Luke 12:33 Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.

Will there be money in heaven? I don't know, but I do know there will be something that is a lot like money – close enough so that Jesus was being accurate when he described it with financial language. So when you get to heaven and you are given your reward, it will be a lot like winning the lottery.

Another analogy Scripture uses – crowns.

1 Corinthians 9:25 Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.

Back then they gave the winner a crown, we give a gold medal, but either way the purpose is to bestow honor on the person.

So our reward will be like money – something we can use to do things or to help people or to acquire things in heaven. And our reward will be like crowns – medals that God will award to us for the purpose of honoring us.

People who say we shouldn't be motivated by rewards that are trying to be holier than Jesus. Jesus endured the cross for the joy set before him. God commands us to store up treasure in heaven, and he constantly offers rewards. 25% of the Sermon on the Mount is about rewards. There's almost a full chapter on the topic of rewards in Mt.6. The anti-reward people will try to say, "Yeah, God tells us about rewards, but he doesn't want that to be our motivation." What kind of cruel, dishonest kind of concept do they have of God? Can you imagine doing that to your kids? "I'll give you a cookie if you do this." So they do it and then you slap their hand: "You shouldn't have done it for the cookie! You should have done it for love." That would be downright cruel – to offer them something that shouldn't be a motivation. God would never do that to us because he never tempts anyone toward evil.

It doesn't honor God if you snub his offers of reward. Like if a woman said to her husband, "If you do such and such, I will make you the happiest man in the world tonight" and he says, "I'm not motivated by that. I'll do it, but only because I'm such a loving man – I'm not interested in your promises of reward." That would not honor her. If God offers a reward, and it doesn't have a strong draw on your heart, that just proves one thing: you don't trust God. You don't trust him to be good. You don't trust him to be creative. You don't trust him to be capable of giving you something that will fill you with delight.

Now, suppose someone says, "I want to be motivated by promises of rewards. I know I should, but the truth is, I just don't. For some reason, the promise of rewards in heaven just doesn't really motivate me."

Go back to the monopoly illustration from last week. I asked if you would give up \$50,000 of play money in a Monopoly game for a real \$50K car. But what if it's not a car? Suppose it's just some rich friend who says, "If you give me your monopoly money, I will give you something really, really great."

"What is it?"

"I'm not going to say."

But trust me – you'll love it!" Will you do it? It depends on whether or not you trust your friend. If you trust that friend, you'll hand over the money and will be all excited. If you don't trust him, you'll be reluctant.

And if you have a hard time with that, let the illustrations Jesus gave help you. People enjoy daydreaming about winning the lottery. That's one of the worst and most sinful things you can ever do if it causes you to love money. But if you want to daydream about that, daydream about it on the new earth. Then instead of making you love money in this world, it will make you eager for the new heavens and the new earth, and that's a good thing. I think one reason we have such a hard time getting excited about reward is that we turn it into such an ethereal, abstract thing, that it has no meaning. Jesus gave us illustrations that were concrete – like the delightful things in this life. So think along those lines.

And secondly, think a lot about the character of God. I've often used the illustration of a kid with two uncles that always come for Christmas, one who is great at picking out the best gifts ever, and the

other who always gives lame gifts. After a while, you get so you get excited when that first uncle gives you a gift, even though you can't even imagine what could be in the box (because he always gets you things that weren't on your list, but that you like even more than anything you thought of). If you don't know what's in the box, how could you be excited about it? You're truly excited, because you know what that uncle is like. You know his character. That's the key to being excited about eternal rewards. Focus on what God is like. Focus on his nature and character. How kind is he? How generous is he? How rich is he? How loving is he? How creative is he? So what kind of things do you think God would give as a reward for things that greatly please him?