

HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND?

Paul holds out the impoverished church in Macedonia as an extraordinary example of gracious giving and calls on the far more affluent church in Corinth to follow their example.

And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. ²In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity... Entirely on their own, ⁴they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. ⁵And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us (2 Corinthians 8:1-5).

Just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving... For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake, he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:7,9).

Paul's instruction provides four meaningful guidelines:

1. Give yourself fully to the Lord.
2. Prayerfully consider the appeals of your leaders.
3. Using Scripture as your guide ask the Lord what it might look like for you to excel in the grace of giving.
4. Rearrange your life and your priorities so that you might excel (in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness, in love and) in the grace of giving.

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A Generous Heart

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF GIVING



God has always called his people to give freely of themselves and their resources to honor him and accomplish his purposes in his church and throughout the world.

GIVING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The foundational call of the Old Testament is “Love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength (Deuteronomy 6:5).” Giving is a means of acknowledging God’s goodness and entering into his blessing.

The first act of giving was in eternity past when the Father gave himself freely to the Son, the Son gave himself freely to the Father, and the Spirit gave himself freely to the Father and the Son. We give freely of ourselves because we serve a God who gives freely of himself.

The first offering in Scripture occurs shortly after the fall. We learn quickly that there are gifts that please God and gifts that do not.

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. ³In the course of time, Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. ⁴And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, ⁵but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor (Genesis 4:2-5).

There is also the curious episode where Abraham offers a tenth of his possessions to Melchizedek, to honor God for a decisive victory over the four kings of the plains who had captured his nephew Lot.

¹⁸ Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, ¹⁹ and he blessed Abram, saying, “Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. ²⁰ And praise be to God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand. Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything. (Genesis 14:18-20) ”

Years later, Abraham's grandson, Jacob, adopts the same practice. He has an encounter with the living God and Bethel and pledges to give him a tenth of all he receives (Genesis 28:21-22).

When giving is formalized in the Law, it revolves around the temple (or tabernacle) and care for the poor.

"A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord; it is holy to the Lord (Leviticus 27:30).

"I give to the Levites all the tithes in Israel as their inheritance in return for the work they do while serving at the tent of meeting (Numbers 18:21).

The tithe was to be given as part of a national celebration to honor God and recognize his goodness (Deuteronomy 1:17-19).

In addition to giving tithes and offerings, the nation of Israel was to respond spontaneously to the needs of the poor (Leviticus 19:9-10).

On one occasion, the people of Israel gave so much, that Moses compelled them to stop giving (Exodus 36:6-7).

David captures the spirit of giving in his prayer of thanksgiving for the contributions Israel's leaders made toward the construction of the temple.

"But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand... ¹⁶Lord our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a temple for your Holy Name comes from your hand, and all of it belongs to you (1 Chronicles 29:14, 16).

The overarching principle in both the Old and the New Testament is that we give in response to God's generosity, and he responds to our generosity with even greater generosity.

Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; ¹⁰then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine (Proverbs 3:9-10).

Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the Lord Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it (Malachi 3:10).

While we are not under the Mosaic Law, it does serve as a pattern for our instruction. From the Old Testament, we come away with three key ideas.

1. The tithe (or giving 10% of one's income) becomes a marker for biblical generosity. Not a requirement, merely a benchmark.
2. The principle of first fruits means that we give our first and best to God rather than determining our lifestyle and giving God what is left over.
3. We are not only to give formally but spontaneously in response to the needs of others.

GIVING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The central call of the New Testament is "to offer yourselves to God as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1)." Once again, we find giving is a means of acknowledging God's goodness and entering into his blessing.

By the time the book of Acts comes to a close, church buildings are not in the picture. The church in Ephesus, however, met in a rented hall (Acts 19:9). So there were some building expenses in the life of at least one church.

While we no longer have a priesthood, the call of Jesus and the Apostles is to support those who have given themselves in service to the gospel

"Do not get any gold or silver or copper to take with you in your belts — no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff, for the worker, is worth his keep (Matthew 10:9-10).

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

Nevertheless, the one who receives instruction in the word should share all good things with their instructor (Galatians 6:6).

Sharing with the poor is an even higher priority in the New Testament. Many in the church have become poor and disenfranchised because of their commitment to Christ. Our most profound theology on giving flows out of Paul's appeal to the Gentiles to support their impoverished brothers and sisters in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8-9)

The measure of giving in the New Testament is Christ.

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake, he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Both Jesus and Paul identify giving as a means of grace, through which we acknowledge God's goodness and enter into his blessing.

Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you (Luke 6:38)."

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work (2 Corinthians 9:6-8).