

Membership Class  
November 15, 2015

## **Tithing and Giving; Being Disciples in the Church**

(Word Count: aim for 3000-3100 total)

*Open with prayer*

### **Call for Questions**

Week seven of this series (December 13) will be a Question and Answer / Open Discussion session. If you have questions that you particularly want to discuss and are worried we're not going to cover them before that, please let me know what they are! You can either speak to me personally or you can send me an email, and I'll make sure they make the list (I might even prepare to talk about them, who knows?).

### **Introduction to this lecture**

Today we are going to look at two more areas of Christian obedience which our covenant of membership speaks of. The first is giving to the Lord, which in practical terms normally means giving to the work of the church. "To the end that you may grow in the Christian life, do you promise that you will ... give to the Lord's work as He shall prosper you?" (part of Question 5). The second is quite different, and more general. "Do you purpose to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness in all the relationships of life, faithfully to perform your whole duty as a true servant of Jesus Christ, and seek to win others to Him?" (Question 6). We're going to use this as an opportunity to talk about discipleship, a word that refers both to growing in our commitment to Jesus Christ and to telling others about him. First, giving.

## **Tithing and Giving**

How does worship relate to everyday life? Few people say so, but many people live as though giving God some time each week excuses them from obedience during the rest of the week: these are Sunday Christians (or “Chreaster Christians,” because they only go to church on Christmas and Easter). Others dismiss the importance of formal, set-aside times of worship: they reason that all of life is worship. If that’s so, then it can’t be terribly important to *go to* worship. We talked about this a few weeks ago. What’s interesting is that the net effect of being a Sunday Christian or a never-go-to-church Christian is the same: God becomes less and less a part of your life.

The Bible relates worship to all of life. God was at work for six days of creation, and rested on the seventh! The seventh day was to be given to God in a special way: it was a sacrifice of sorts. After the Passover and Exodus, God told Moses that every firstborn male was holy to him—set apart for his service and use: parents or farmers would have to “buy back” their firstborn sons and animals by making a donation to the priesthood. In the New Testament, praise and giving to the church (Hebrews 13:15-16) are described as sacrifices. God made the mouth: we give him praise to show that everything we say belongs to him. To take the same mouth and use it for evil is hypocrisy: “With [the tongue] we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and saltwater?” (James 3:9-11). Praising God does not give us permission to use our mouths for evil the rest of the time: rather, praising God sets the expectation that our mouths should be used in God’s service the rest of the time. The holiness of the Temple didn’t mean that the rest of the land was unholy: it *made* the land holy (although not as holy as the Temple).

In the same way, the tithes (there was more than one kind of tithe, perhaps amounting to a third of most men’s income!) meant that all of an Israelite’s possessions were ultimately God’s possessions—held in trust for God. The Sabbath day, gathered worship, the Temple, firstborn children, the tithe: when a significant chunk of any good thing is set aside explicitly for God, it marks the rest as God’s as well. This is how worship works. You can be a

fan of your favorite sports team all the time, but the hours when you're watching them play renew and recreate your loyalty. But if you *never* watch them play, you become a nominal sports fan (I, Pastor Howe, haven't seen the Red Sox play in several years; I think I count as a nominal Sox fan by now).

The Old Testament described clear patterns for tithing (literally "tenting," giving a tenth of produce or income). Israelites were to tithe for the upkeep of the priests and Levites, and they were also to tithe for the great annual feasts. This was part of the worship they were called to give. And special warnings and promises were made concerning these tithes: "Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. But you say, 'How shall we return?' Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, 'How have we robbed you?' In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the Lord of hosts. Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts," (Malachi 3:7-12).

How about us? Are the same strict requirements for tithing on us? I would say not, at least not with the clarity and strictness we find in the Old Covenant. Giving is still part of how we worship God: "Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come," (1 Corinthians 16:1-2). Paul tells the Christians in Corinth to set aside their offerings *in connection with the worship service*. As mentioned before, Hebrews refers to donations as "sacrifices" (Hebrews 13:16). Furthermore, the same kind of promises are made: "The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good

work. As it is written, ‘He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.’ He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God.” (2 Corinthians 9:6-12).

Notice that Paul speaks of free, cheerful giving as something God will bless (“whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully”), as something that proves the inner reality of the heart (quoting Psalm 112, which speaks of “the man who fears the Lord,” he says that “his righteousness,” meaning the proof of his faith in God, “endures forever”), and as something that glorifies God (“[your gift will] produce thanksgiving to God,” and it is currently “overflowing in many thanksgivings to God”). Do you want to be blessed? Do you want to deepen your assurance of faith? Do you want God to be glorified (I hope so!)? Then give, generously and cheerfully.

It’s probably worth also mentioning where your money goes when you give it to God’s work. It mainly goes, first, to further the ministry of the gospel and, second, to care for the poor. Paul writes about paying those who preach, “Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches. Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap,” (Galatians 6:6-7—more of that sowing and reaping!). How that gets worked out is discussed every year in our annual budget meeting: the way the church spends money is no secret, and members all get to have input on it. In a small church like ours, the biggest thing we pay for is the pastor’s salary! But we also use funds to care for the poor among us, to pay the rent for the church building, and to support outside ministries.

Give *generously*, even sacrificially. A tenth is a good starting point, but many of us will not stay there. Give *cheerfully*: “God loves a cheerful giver.” Give quietly. “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven ... When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in

secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you,” (Matthew 6:1, 3, 4). You can’t always be absolutely secret about your giving, of course, but the goal is that you are giving with one audience in mind: God. You want his reward, which is much better than the admiration of other people. Give *regularly* (as regular as your income) and prepare to give flexibly. The model of “tithe and offering” is helpful here: set a regular percentage of your income to give, and prepare to give beyond that when good causes show up.

*5 minutes for questions*

### **Being Disciples in the Church**

Now let’s tackle one of the most debated terms in Christian lingo: discipleship.

When Jesus calls a man, he doesn’t just call him to believe, he calls him to turn away from his sins. That means that being a Christian is a matter both of faith and of repentance. Over the course of our lives we are to pursue holiness, constantly learning more about the character of God and about obedience to God. We do these things in the context of the church. The term “disciple” basically means “learner,” and we find it throughout the gospels, referring to those who were following Jesus, listening to and believing his words. At the end of the gospel of Matthew, Jesus speaks these famous words: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age,” (Matthew 18:18-20). Discipleship is based on Jesus’ authority. It starts with conversion but doesn’t end there: “baptizing them ... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded.”

Making disciples is the Christian mission. We are made disciples by the teaching and example of others, and we in turn are to make disciples through our own teaching and example. This is essentially what we commit to when we set out to “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness in all the relationships of life, faithfully to perform your whole

duty as a true servant of Jesus Christ, and seek to win others to Him?” Let me just sketch out a few important aspects of being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Disciples are converts. They are people who have been baptized—the outward sign of conversion and discipleship. But they also have a real connection with God: they *know* the gospel, and they *believe* the gospel. They’re not Christians in name only, or because their parents are Christians. Maybe they don’t remember when they *didn’t* have faith in God, but they know the God they worship.

*Disciples are learners.* We are called to learn what Christ has commanded: righteousness of life, humility, genuine faith without any hypocrisy. That takes going to church, it takes reading and studying the Bible, it takes learning from others (including learning the Catechism!). So learning to be like Christ happens through the “means of grace” (the read and preached word of God, the sacraments, and prayer). But it also happens through ongoing relationships with imperfect Christians, primarily in church. Paul says, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ,” (1 Corinthians 11:1). We are not just to imitate the apostles, either: he speaks of churches imitating other churches (1 Thessalonians 2:14) as they persevere through suffering for Christ. We want to take the wisdom and guidance of the church as seriously as possible. There are no lone Christians. Christians are people who learn from Christ *by learning from other people*.

*Disciples fight sin in their own hearts and lives.* “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry,” (Colossians 3:5). No Christian is perfect until he or she goes to heaven: don’t let anyone tell you different. But also, no Christian makes peace with his or her sin. Disciples check themselves against the law of God. When they are making decisions, they don’t ask first what other people will like, or what will feel good; they ask first, “Does this please God? Is this what God wants of me?” Faith is required here: faith that God will bless us and make our loss worthwhile. This is called “self-denial,” and Jesus commanded it: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me,” (Matthew 16:24). He also instructed to stop worrying about our own needs and focus on obeying him: “Do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ...

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you,” (Matthew 6:31-33). Disciples recognize that they are either running toward Christ or running away from him: there is no in-between option.

*Disciples make disciples.* Some of those who become disciples of Jesus Christ will become elders or pastors in the church, and they are given the responsibility of baptizing and giving authoritative teaching. But the call to make disciples is for every disciple, not just the professionals. We promise to “seek to win others to” Christ in membership vow 6. Some people are natural evangelists — they seem to start up conversations about Jesus with everyone they meet. But what about the rest of us? I’m no star evangelist, but here are four things to remember as you think about telling others about Christ:

1. *Words and actions work together.* People you know will decide what they think about Christians, and therefore about Christ, by watching you. As a disciple, obedience to Christ comes first for you. Also, don’t think that because you’re behaving well, you never need to talk about Jesus Christ with others. People are saved by believing the gospel, and to believe it they have to hear it!
2. *Pray for those closest to you.* If you care about your friends who are headed for hell, pray for them. Pray that God would save and change them, that he would bless them and help them in everyday life, and that he would give you opportunities to talk to them about Christ. Notice I say: those closest to you. Praying for the lost on the other side of the world is good, but things get real when you start praying for your friend you see every day.
3. *Play as a team.* It’s great to bring the gospel to others individually; it’s even more powerful as a team. Get Christian friends to pray for your friends; take opportunities to invite them to church; look for ways to get a group conversation about Christ going — maybe your friend would read the Bible with you, if another friend were along for the ride.
4. *Open your mouth when God opens the door.* The enemy wants you to be afraid of talking about Jesus Christ, and you’ll find all sorts of reasons why you can’t. Be brave. Ask

God for help, and when the opportunity presents itself, tell people the good news: we are sinners against God, but God has provided a way of escape from his anger through the death and resurrection of his son, Jesus. So God doesn't have to be our judge and punisher any longer: he can be our good Father, and we can have the life we were made to have: eternal life with God in a new creation.

Finally, *disciples take on responsibility*. All Christians have been given gifts by the Holy Spirit to help and bless the rest of the church (Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12). What's your gift? Look around, see what needs to be done, and figure out if you can do it. For now at least, that's your gift! As you mature, consider office in the church: serving as an elder or as a deacon (the office of deacon is open to both men and women in the Reformed Presbyterian Church). "If anyone aspires to the office of [elder]," Paul says, "he desires a noble task," and "those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus," (1 Timothy 3:1, 13). Just as growing to adulthood means both great joy and great responsibility, growing as a disciple of Christ means exercising the gifts he has given for the good of his people and the blessing of the world.