

“Money and Possessions part 5” Steve Harden 8/10/20

You can be turning in your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 8. We'll be all over the Scriptures tonight, we're kind of giving an overview and so we will get to 2 Corinthians 8 in the second half so don't be alarmed. We'll get there. We're looking at 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. This is the final message on money and possessions, for the last five weeks we've been looking at what the scriptures say about money and possessions and they say a lot. I think we could go for six months or a year and still not cover everything that the Lord says about money and possessions. We're not going to. Tonight is the last night. Did I hear an amen? It's almost overwhelming how much the Bible says about money and possessions but there are some predominant themes and we've been looking at those over the last several weeks.

The first one that we saw was that God owns it all. It's all His. Psalm 50 says, “For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on 1,000 hills. I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine.” God owns it all. The second thing that we saw is that we're His stewards, or if you will, we are His asset managers. He gives each one of us what He wills and expects us to manage His wealth well. So, He owns it all, we are stewards and then last week we saw that God provides for our material needs and He provides two elements. First of all, He provides for us in our living and our sustenance, He provides our living, but He also provides for us to give to others. We saw that in 2 Corinthians 9 last week.

Now, I'm afraid that the church in the U.S. hasn't gotten or understood giving away our possessions for the needs of others. Let me give you some statistics. On average, Christians give about 2.5% of their income. During the Great Depression of the '30's, Christians gave 3.3% of their income, so percentage wise we give less than they did in the Great Depression. Of the families that make \$75,000 or more in a year, only 1% tithe. Those who made \$20,000 or less annually are eight times more likely to give than those who make \$75,000 or more. Those who tithe make up less than 25% of the church. And finally, about 4 out of 10 of those who are regular church attenders give nothing at all. Those are U.S. statistics put out by Push Pay our payment processor. As you can tell, now I don't know what our statistics are, I don't think they're that low, you all are very faithful in giving but as a whole in the U.S. we're not very healthy when it comes to giving to the work of the Lord. All is not well in the church in regard to our understanding of how the gospel informs our giving.

So tonight, I just want to give you some thoughts about how the gospel affects our giving. We'll be looking at giving in the Old Testament, we'll be looking at giving in the New Testament, and then at some characteristics of a gospel-oriented giver. So, first of all, giving in the Old Testament. There are two types of giving we see in the Old Testament, but by far the predominant type of giving is the tithe, and most of you, probably, if you've been around the church, recognize that term. The tithe literally means a tenth. So, you can't tithe 5% and you can't tithe 20% because it just doesn't work out that way, a tithe means a tenth, okay? That was the predominant giving vehicle or giving amount in the Old Testament. It's interesting that we see tithing in the pre-Mosaic law era. Before the Mosaic law was given, we saw tithing. We saw it with Abraham, the father of Israel. The oldest reference to tithing in the Bible is in Genesis 14 when Abraham gave a tithe of the spoils of war to a mysterious figure called Melchizedek. Now, we don't see any command for him to do that, but he did it from a heart of gratitude toward God for giving him a great victory in war. So that was the very first time we saw the word tithe.

We see it also in Genesis 28 with Jacob. Jacob had a dream at Bethel, if you'll remember, where God promised to be with him and to give him a great land and many possessions and descendants. And in response to God's promise to him, Jacob vows to give a tithe of all that the Lord gives to him. Now, Jacob recognizes that everything he will get in the days to come is God's and what He gives to Jacob is a gift to him. He's not giving something that he worked for. He recognizes that God has promised to bless him, and he says, "Whatever you give me, well the first tenth is yours." Okay?

So, there's two examples of the tithe before Mosaic law, but it really came into its own with Moses and the Mosaic law. It was made a part of the law in Leviticus 27, we read: "30 "Every tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the trees, is the LORD'S; it is holy to the LORD. 31 If a man wishes to redeem some of his tithe, he shall add a fifth to it. 32 And every tithe of herds and flocks, every tenth animal of all that pass under the herdsman's staff, shall be holy to the LORD." So, Moses wrote into the law, directed by God, about tithing. As we examine the Old Testament, we find that there are really three different tithes for the Israelites of the Old Testament. The first one was a religious tithe; it was the tithe to support the priests and the Levites. The second was the first fruit tithe where the people brought in the first produce of their harvest, it resembles Jacob's tithe, showing great gratitude toward God for providing the harvest. The third tithe that they give in Old Testament Israel was the tithe to orphans, widows and the poor. The religious tithe was 10%, the first fruit tithe was 10%, but the orphans, widows and poor tithe only happened every third year, so if you annualize that out that's 23% that God directed the Old Testament Israelites to give.

It's interesting, as you read the Old Testament, you see that the Hebrew people knew that the tithe was God's. It wasn't theirs. They did not give a tithe as we might say it in our New Testament era. No, they repaid the tithe. It was God's. The tithe for Old Testament Israel was not optional, not any more than taxes are for us. They knew that the tithe belonged to the Lord and not tithe was to rob God. So, when you look at Old Testament Israelites, the predominant thing we see in terms of giving their money and possessions was the tithe. But there was also a free offering tithe. A voluntary offering. Where the tithe is recognized as God's, never spoken of as an option, the freewill offering was completely optional; it was always optional. It would always go beyond the tithe, but you were free to give as you so desired. We see it several different times. In Exodus 36 when Moses built the tabernacle, he took a freewill offering of the gold to build the tabernacle. They gave, it's funny, they gave so much that Moses had to say, "Stop. We've got enough. Stop." Since when have you heard a preacher say that, huh? Okay so, Moses said, the tabernacle was a freewill offering. In 1 Chronicles 29, in the building of the temple, David gave the people an opportunity to give toward the building of the temple and in Ezra 1, when the temple needed to be rebuilt, well then, they took freewill offerings for that. It was totally of people's free will, it was not demanded at all. So, to summarize, Old Testament Israel tithed because God told them to, it was not optional, but they also voluntarily gave freewill offerings over and above the tithe.

Let's move on to giving in the New Testament. The New Testament is pretty quiet, frankly, in regard to tithing. Jesus mentioned it once, kind of in passing, if you'll remember, in Matthew 23:23: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others." So, He almost uses the tithe as an example of boy you're really good about legalistically following the tithe, but you don't even give yourself to faith, justice and mercy. So, it wasn't about the tithe at all. That's

when Jesus mentioned it. How many times do you think Paul mentioned the tithe? Zero. It kind of surprised me a little bit honestly when I started looking at it. Paul doesn't mention it all, so where does that leave us?

Should you tithe? Should I tithe? There are a lot of different opinions on what is required regarding a Christian's duty when it comes to tithing. Simply because there is so little in the New Testament about it, I'm going to give you an opinion tonight. You know very well that I don't like to give opinions from the pulpit, I just want to say, "Thus saith the Lord," and go with it but I'm going to give you an opinion because it says so little about it. You know that I hate legalism. I hate it with a passion. You know that Jesus kept the law, the whole law, perfectly on our behalf. I am no longer under the law, but I am under grace. We are called, as you know, to keep the moral law of God, the ten commandments. It's the character of God. It's not good to neglect that. But I still have a hard time making the case that the tithe was a part of the moral law of the ten commandments. I just don't see it there. So, I am not going to tell you that tithing is law for the Christian. That is a tough sell.

However, we are never told in the New Testament that tithing was discarded, I mean, we're just not told. It doesn't say anything about it. As best I can tell in the last 2,000 years of church history, it was expected as a requirement for Christian living. But here's when my opinion comes in. For the New Testament Christian, the follower of Jesus, the very question: "Do I have to tithe?" seems like the wrong question. "Do I have to tithe?" is not a very good question in my opinion. I think a better question for the New Testament believer is: "How much of God's money do I need to keep for my own needs?" That's a better question. How much money do I need to keep for my own needs? See, I just am not comfortable telling you that a tithe is expected of you, and I'm just as uncomfortable saying that the tithe is all that is expected of you. I don't know. That's between you and the Lord. I don't know your situation. I don't know what God is requiring of you. Asking the question: "Do I have to tithe?" doesn't seem to capture the sense of giving I find in the New Testament.

Can I really say that we who have experienced grace, grace found in the coming of the Messiah, should give no more than the Old Testament Israelite who was required by law to give when they only had the promise of the Messiah? Can I say that my sense of gratitude toward the Lord is less because I'm looking back at the cross than those who were looking forward to the cross? Personally, this is Steve now, personally, I am not troubled by worrying if the tithe is in effect. I am a lot more worried and concerned that I limit my giving to 10%. That concerns me more than, do I have to give a tithe? Everything I have is His, everything! From last week's passage in 2 Corinthians 9, perhaps God limits how much He gives me to steward because I don't give more! So that I can give away more! Do you see the difference? So again, maybe the question is not, "Should I tithe?" But, "How much of God's money shall I keep for my own needs?" If God promises to supply my needs and multiply His provision in relation to how much I give away, the question then is not, "Can I afford to tithe?" But the real question then becomes, "Can I justify a lifestyle that consumes 90% of my income?" That's where I've wrestled. You get 30 minutes of it, I wrestle with it all week. Okay? Can I justify my lifestyle? When the needs are so great?

Let me give you five characteristics of a gospel-oriented giver, five characteristics. Now is when we get to 2 Corinthians, okay? The first characteristic of a gospel-oriented giver is that they give sacrificially. In 2 Corinthians 8 we have the example of the Macedonians. Verse 1: "We want you to know, brothers about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, <sup>2</sup> for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty

have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. <sup>3</sup> For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, <sup>4</sup> begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— <sup>5</sup> and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.” Now, giving in the New Testament church was seen as a gift of grace from God. We get to give as an offering back to Him! The Macedonians were given great grace to give generously and sacrificially. Paul writes, they were poor. For Paul to say they experienced extreme poverty means they were really poor. So much so that it would seem, if you read between the lines, that Paul almost gave them a bye saying, ‘You guys are suffering here, you don’t have to contribute to the saints in Jerusalem. They’re no poorer than you are.’ That’s reading between the lines, okay? But he seems to say that. But the Macedonian church said, “No Paul! Don’t rob us of the joy and of the blessing that we are going to receive by sharing with the saints in Jerusalem. Don’t take that joy away from us!” And so, Paul says they gave beyond their means. Their attitude, I think, goes to the heart of what it means to give as gospel-oriented follower of Jesus. It’s not sacrificial giving until it’s a sacrifice. Perhaps giving sacrificially means that we push our giving beyond the point that the figures add up. I love what C.S. Lewis about this, he said: “I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I’m afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare.” So, gospel-oriented giving is sacrificial.

Secondly, gospel-oriented giving is done willingly. 2 Corinthians 9:7: “Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion.” You really do have to make up your own mind how much you’ll give and then trust Him for your needs. I’m not going to make that call for you. I’m not going to let you check off that box. You’ve got to decide for that. But if you are reluctant to give, or somehow you feel like I’m pressuring you to give, you need to check out your heart because I’m not doing that tonight. Why do I not want to give? What is going on in my heart that makes me unwilling to give? That’s the issue. Do I trust God to provide for my needs? Can you for a moment see the Macedonians talking about whether or not they have to tithe? Can you see that even being a conversation? They are giving because they want to give, for the joy of giving, but no one is saying, “Yeah well I have to check that box.” No! That’s not gospel-oriented giving.

There’s a story told about trappers in Africa that were trapping monkeys and so what they did is they would take a bottle with a narrow neck and they would secure it to the ground and in it they would put the monkey’s favorite nuts. And so, the monkey would come along and they would reach down in that bottle and grab those nuts and when they tried to pull their hands out, they couldn’t get it out with their fists closed. And they would not let go of the nuts. So then, the trappers would just come along and grab the monkeys. You know, that just reminds me how many times we can be enslaved by money because of our unwillingness to let go of our money and possessions. We can be enslaved because of our reluctance to let go of them.

So, we have that gospel-oriented givers give sacrificially and willingly, but third, cheerfully! Again, 2 Corinthians 9:7: “Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” You delight your Father when you give to others. He takes great delight in you. What great privilege we have to trust Him to continue to provide for our needs.

Fourthly, the gospel-oriented giver gives proportionately. Your level of prosperity has nothing to do with joyful giving. I don’t care how much you have. I just don’t. The Macedonians didn’t have a lot to give. They joyfully gave it. Do you remember the widow in Luke 21? She

had two little coins. She made it into the Scriptures! Jesus said, 'She is the one who is pleasing.' They didn't have a lot, but they gave! So, proportionately.

And finally, consistently. 1 Corinthians 16:2, "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." Plan your giving. Let it be the first thing you do when you do your budget. Give systematically. I think there's a place for spontaneous giving, but I don't think it takes the place of systematic giving, okay? Gospel-oriented giving is an expression, my friend, of what's going on right here in your heart. Giving is the response of the heart that is full of gratitude for the grace that has been given to you. We give because God gave so much for us. He gave His Son. Gospel-oriented giving helps me not take His generosity for granted. It reminds me again and again that gratitude is the fuel that drives our giving.

So, what do you want me to do, Steve? I'm glad you asked. First, examine your attitude toward money and possessions, and this is general, just overall. What is my attitude? What is my heart when I think about that? Do you understand that God owns it all, and do you see yourself as His asset manager? Has that truth been driven down into your heart? Secondly, examine your giving levels and your attitude toward giving. Ask yourself, do I give sacrificially and willingly and cheerfully and proportionately and consistently?

Let me encourage you that money does not just indicate where your heart is, and it does, but it also determines where your heart goes. Not only where it is, but where it goes. If you've been around me very much, one of my mantras is that emotion follows motion. Activity comes first and then you let your emotions catch up. In a train analogy, motion is the engine and our emotions are the caboose. The caboose will follow where the engine goes. So, what does that have to do with money? It means that you take action! You give more than you can afford, and you see what God does and you see where your heart goes. Your heart will go where your treasure dwells, Jesus said.

Where do I give, Steve? Where do you want me to give? Well, I think the Bible specifically names three places. Let me give them to you quickly. First of all, we give to the poor. We find that here in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. They are taking up an offering for the poor in the Jerusalem church. One of the places we give is City of Hope. Ethos gives as a church; some your offerings go to City of Hope. It is a ministry to the homeless. Many of us give, from our congregation, directly to City of Hope. We have a mercy team, or we had a mercy team, we have a mercy fund, we're kind of in an in between stage but we want to start that back up, where we give to benevolence, especially to those inside the church that need it.

The second area where we give, from Scripture, is to missionaries. We see that in 1 Corinthians 9. Ethos gives away 10% of everything that comes in, to missionary endeavors. We support church planting efforts. We support RUF, our college ministry. We support the Terazoe's in Spain. We support some of our own members here, Ben and Elizabeth Ledford, Shelli Jones, and Sarah we support directly from the church, and many of you support them directly as well. So, we support missionaries, the poor, missionaries and then ministers. 1 Timothy 5:18 says those that proclaim the gospel should be able to earn their living, so when you give to Ethos you fund church ministries, and part of that is just providing for your staff and for your pastors. So those are three biblical places where you can decide you want to give.

But as I close out five weeks of talking about money and possessions, let me just suggest one more time that giving is a heart issue, it's not a law issue. It's a heart issue. Where is my heart? Am I storing up treasures in heaven or storing up here where moth and rust destroy, and thieves break in and steal? My friend, God wants your heart. He owns the cattle on a thousand

hills. It's not about money to Him. He wants your heart. And where your money goes, your heart will follow. Let's pray.

Father, thank you that you have given us so much direction in Your word about money. It's almost overwhelming. I think You wrote so much because You knew that we would need encouragement, time and again, because You know the hold that money and possessions can have on us. Lord, we do not want to have any other gods before You. We want our hearts to be wholly Yours. One of the ways our hearts display themselves is in how we manage and give. Would You make us a people who honor You in how we manage all of our possessions? May we be faithful stewards, I pray in the name of Jesus, Amen.