

What Scripture Says About Giving

How much we give is determined by our sense of how much we have received. Everything Scripture says about giving is in the context of what God has first given us.

And what has been given? Our next breath. Life itself. God's love to know joy and assurance through life and death, sickness and health. Life eternal. Salvation. Confidence that no trouble we know, not even the worst evil, can defeat the goodness God wants in and for us.

What has been given? Assurance that God's grace embraces loved ones, whatever their age, stage, or condition. Prayer as a means of sharing in God's power and love. The church as a means of learning, celebrating, sharing, and passing on God's "amazing grace."

What has been given? The real question is what hasn't been given? All that we have and are come from God or lead to God. Nothing is outside God's provision and providence.

Above all, we have been given the One who makes all this known and possible: Jesus, our Savior and Friend, who is Christ, our Lord.

Beyond speechless wonder, the only genuine response to all this is gratitude--a heartfelt thankfulness that makes us generous, less as a duty than as the least we can do in response to all God does for us.

The Bible says three things about how much, at the least, we should give in gratitude to God:

The Old Testament speaks of first fruits giving, in which what is shared from all we have been given comes "off the top"--a good reminder that, before all else, God and what God does for us is priority number one in our lives. (See, for example, Exodus 34:22; Proverbs 3:9-10; Numbers 28:26.)

Then, the Old Testament teaches, and the New Testament presumes, the tithe--the giving of ten per cent of one's income and belongings through one's place of worship. (See, for example, the first and last books of the Old Testament: Genesis 28:22, Malachi 3:6-12; also, Leviticus 27:30-32; Numbers 18:21-28; Deuteronomy 12:6-17, 14:22-29; in the New Testament: Matthew 23:23; Luke 11:42; Hebrews 7:4-10.)

The New Testament, and particularly St. Paul, go beyond tithing to teach proportionate giving--meaning the more we have, the more we should give. (See 2 Corinthians, chapters 8 and 9.)

All together, these three measures or standards might be expressed this way: In

gratitude to God for all that God in Christ does for us, we should give at least 10% of our income right off the top, going beyond that in proportion to what we have.

Some of us will protest that this is much more than we can do. But is this not also the case with Jesus' command to love our enemies? And what of the other hard demands of following Christ? Do they not go far beyond what we think reasonable and practical?

The best response to high standards is not to lower them to a comfortable level, but to ask for God's grace and guidance to help us grow. God's biddings are God's enablings: we're never asked to do anything we're not also enabled to do.

The solution for those who feel they cannot tithe is to respect the standard and grow towards it by the grace and guidance of God. (Perhaps, for some, this will mean accepting for the time being a standard of not 10%, but 3%, as a first step. Whatever one's level of giving, a commitment can be made to accept the tithe as one's standard and to move toward it on some fixed basis.)

In all of this, the motivating spirit is gratitude not servitude, joy not duty, love not law. We dare not judge others lest by that very act we condemn ourselves. But neither dare we withhold the truth of God's Word, lest by that act we fail the Lord.

The church is God's business, not ours; its success rests on God's promises, not ours. And so it is that, in the work of the church, we must play by God's rules, not ours.

God wants nothing but the best for the church and for us all. Following God's Word in the strength and confidence of Christ, the best comes to pass--slowly as we see it, perhaps, but surely and beyond all doubt.

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