

Back To Basics Part 4

As part of our Back to Basics series we've talked about the bible, prayer, the church and this morning I want to talk about giving. You may think that doesn't sound very spiritual, but the truth is there is a spiritual principle of giving that isn't just about money, it is about a way of life. I believe giving is at the heart of who we are as followers of Christ and I will show you what I mean in just a moment. We are going to talk about money but don't panic, don't start hiding your wallet or your purse just yet. We've already received the offering so no one will be asking you for more money today. We aren't selling anything. But I believe this teaching is important for all of us as we endeavor to serve the Lord.

When I was a child going to church mom would ask, "Do you have your bible? Do you have your offering?" They made sure I had something to put in the offering to teach me the habit of giving. We receive an offering in every service. Perhaps you watch as people give in the offering and think, "what's this all about anyway? What's the reason behind all of this?" If that's the case, I hope to answer some of your questions this morning.

You know it takes money to keep the lights on and the airconditioners working and it takes money to carry out the mission of the church, preaching and teaching and making disciples, serving our community and our world, sharing the gospel and the love of Christ with others. Your giving makes that possible. In case you are wondering, I don't know who pays tithes or gives in the offering and who doesn't. On my own I wouldn't even know how to access the information if I wanted to find out. The only time I ask about giving and tithing is when we examine someone who is nominated to serve as a deacon in the church. The deacons must be tithers and givers. So relax, I'm not pointing anyone out this morning, but I'm excited about teaching on this subject because if you learn to be a giver it adds blessing and joy to your life. The spiritual principle of giving isn't just about money, it is about a way of life. It is about living a life of generosity and obedience to God. Jesus said, **"It is more blessed to give than to receive."** Acts 20:35. Do you want to add blessing to your life? Learn to be a giver! Not just giving money to church or paying your tithes, but learn to be a giver, sharing your life, your possessions, your money and your blessings with others. There is no greater blessing than when you are giving to God and others.

If I asked "Why should we give to the Lord? Why should we give tithes and offerings?" We can come up with several answers but a couple of things stand out in a very broad sense.

First of all, **Giving reflects the very nature of God.** Giving is at the heart of who God is. **“God so loved the world that he gave...” John 3:16** It is how we understand God. He is a giver, an initiator, giving to save us, to sustain us, to help us. We were created in the image of God and we are partakers now through Christ of his nature so it is only natural that we should become givers, like our Heavenly Father. We have his dna! This is what I meant when I said giving is at the very heart of what it means to be a follower of Christ. **We give because it is the very nature of a Christian to be a giver.** It is part of our spiritual nature, but we may have to learn and train our hearts and our minds to be generous givers. We give because we want to be like Him.

Secondly, **We give because God instructs us to give.** It is a commandment for us to give. The first people on the planet were taught to bring from their possessions, from their flocks and from the produce of the land and give part of it freely to the Lord. Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel were taught to give to the Lord. God didn't need their vegetables and sheep, but they needed to give. They needed to express their gratitude and devotion to the Lord. They needed the blessing associated with obedience and the freedom associated with generosity. God knew that where our treasure is, that's where our heart would be and he wanted to make sure that heart connection was tied to something of eternal value and consequence. Giving is obedience to his command. Giving is an expression of gratitude and thanksgiving. Giving is a reflection of the new nature God gives to us.

When we talk about giving and about money in the church, we typically talk about tithing. The word “tithe” means one tenth. The bible teaches us to give one tenth of our earnings, our increase to the Lord. If you earn \$1, you give ten cents to the Lord and his work. If you earn \$100, you give \$10 and so on. I separate tithing from giving. Notice we always say “We are receiving the Lord's tithes and our offering.” That's because the tithe belongs to the Lord. It's the Lord's tithe. I don't even consider that 10% as being something I can control. That's the Lord's. Over and above the tithe are offerings. Above the ten percent tithe are the offerings we give to missionaries, to special projects and needs, etc. It is the Lord's tithe and our offerings.

In the last book of the Old Testament, in Malachi 3, God gives us a word of instruction concerning tithing and it shows how seriously God views this principle of giving. The people

had stopped bringing their tithes and offerings to the Lord and God responds with a word of rebuke and an invitation and promise.

“Return to me, and I will return to you”, says the Lord Almighty. But you ask, ‘How are we to return?’ Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, ‘How do we rob you?’ In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse – the whole nation of you – because you are robbing me. 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 you will not have room enough for it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit, says the Lord Almighty. Then all the nations will call you blessed for yours will be a delightful land, says the Lord Almighty.” Malachi 3:8-12

God is calling the people back to himself and when they ask, “How are we to return? What will be an appropriate action that shows we are turning our hearts back to you?” The Lord says, “Start paying your tithes and offerings to the Lord. Start with something simple, yet significant.” Let me mention some reasons God wanted Israel, and wants us, to give.

Why respond with tithes and offerings? We’ve already mentioned that giving is at the heart of who God is. He is a giver and he wants his people to look and act like him. He had commanded them to give and this would be a response of obedience to his command. **Tithing and giving is an act of obedience.**

Why is this a good way to respond in returning to the Lord? Because **Everyone can pay a tithe.** Everyone had something from which they could tithe. Remember the old story of the poor farmer who was praying and said, “Lord if I had a million dollars I would give it to you to help the church. If only I had a million dollars I would help the poor and the needy around me.” The Lord said, ‘How about giving one of your pigs to help feed the poor?’ The farmer said, “Careful now Lord, you know I’ve got pigs.”

The tithe was and is equal for everyone, the rich and the poor. Whatever you have, you can give a tenth of it. If all you had was a dime, you gave your penny. For the Israelites, if all you had was a bushel of corn, you gave a tenth of a bushel. If you had ten pigs, you gave one pig. Everyone could tithe.

Tithing and giving expresses the devotion of the heart. Remember the old saying, “Put your money where your mouth is.” Anyone can say they are devoted to something, but are

you willing to invest, to give, to sacrifice for something? Are you willing to give your money, your treasure? It's not the only expression of devotion, but it is certainly one sign of a devoted and surrendered heart. Jesus said, **“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”** **Matthew 6:21.** Our willingness to give of our possessions in obedience to the Lord is a pretty good indicator of where our heart is. Show me your heart through your obedient giving.

Tithing and giving is a discipline that breaks the stronghold of greed. Faithfulness in tithing and giving as a way of life helps keep our hearts open to giving. There is opportunity in every service to give. No one is compelled to give, but as your heart directs you, you have opportunity to give and bless others and the work of the Lord.

Tithing and giving illustrates our dependence on the Lord as our source. Tithing is an act of trust and surrender. Especially when times are hard economically, tithing is an act of trust. As we respond in obedience and give, we are saying, ‘Lord, I believe you will honor your word and you will provide for me. That 10% belongs to you. I trust you.’ Actually, it all belongs to him and our tithing is a testimony to our present and future dependence upon and trust in the Lord.

Notice he says bring the tithe into the storehouse “that there may be food in my house.” The people were to pay their tithes so that the daily needs of the temple could be taken care of as well as provision for the priests and Levites. Essentially the Lord was saying, pay your tithes so the ministries of the church can continue. **As we pay our tithe we physically and financially make His priorities our priorities.**

If there is no food in the house, how can we feed the spiritually and even the physically hungry that come to us? You give your tithes and offerings to this church and it means there is food in the Lord's house to meet the needs of people. Spiritually there is food to feed the spiritually hungry. More than \$700,000 was given last year through this church to tell people at home and around the world that their only hope is found in Jesus Christ. Your tithes and offerings provide food for the spiritually dying. And your giving provided physical, literal food and shelter and help for people in this church and in this community that couldn't have made it without the assistance given by Carbondale Assembly of God. Bring the tithe into the storehouse so there will be provision in my house for the work to be done, the Lord said. That's why it's important.

Notice the Lord made tithing and giving personal. Your tithe is given to the church to help meet those needs we've just mentioned, but the Lord said, **"Yet you rob me. But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse – the whole nation of you – because you are robbing me."** Our tithe belongs to the Lord. In that sense, though we make the check out to Carbondale Assembly of God, we are paying our tithe, not to the church, but to the Lord. If the church isn't being a good steward of the money, that will be between the pastor or the leadership and the Lord, but our responsibility is to bring our tithe to the Lord. A lot of folks tell me their tithe check is the first one they write every month or every week. It is symbolic of their commitment to the Lord. This money belongs to the Lord. His priority is my priority.

I remember as a boy, my dad paid his tithes but then he also sent offerings to missionaries and other pledges he made. Back in the day he would send cash and he kept it in a bank bag or in a separate wallet and he always referred to it as "the Lord's money." It was special, set apart to the Lord. That made an impression on me as a boy. Our tithe is the Lord's money. It belongs to him and isn't to be used for anything else.

Don't touch what belongs to the Lord. You can steward it, care for it, but don't eat it, don't spend it because it's not yours to spend. It belongs to the Lord. He said we would be under a curse if we robbed God by spending His money instead of giving the tithe to the Lord.

We don't want to live under a curse. Instead, look at his promise when we give! He said **"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 you will not have room enough for it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit, says the Lord Almighty. Then all the nations will call you blessed for yours will be a delightful land, says the Lord Almighty."** We don't give merely in order to receive, but what a blessing is reserved for those who obey the Lord in giving.

Understand this is a principle for living. We operate out of life principles and if we obey the Lord and live by this principle of giving, there is tremendous blessing and provision that accompanies obedience to God's word, his will and his order of things. The bible says, "A generous man will himself be blessed..." Proverbs 22:9. There is blessing that comes with giving.

“But I don’t know if I can afford to give away 10% of my income to God. I can’t live on only 90%.” Well, look at his promise. He said “test me in this.” That’s interesting because we aren’t supposed to test the Lord, but he gives us permission in this. Test me. Prove me in this. Now look what he says. If we bring our tithes and offerings to the Lord in obedience to his word, he will prevent pests from devouring our crops and the vines in our fields will not cast their fruit. You say, “Well that doesn’t help me because I’m not a farmer.” King James Version says he will “Rebuke the devourer for your sakes.” Don’t think only in terms of farming. Think in terms of anything that chews up 10% of your income in unexpected ways. God said he would stop the pests, the devourer, from eating up your harvest, your income. If you don’t tithe, your harvest, your income is damaged in ways you didn’t expect and the pests devour more than 10% and you don’t even realize it. God says bring your tithes to the store house and prove me in this and you will find that because I rebuke the devourer, (i.e. those things that eat up big chunks of your income) the 90% you have left after tithing will prove to be more than the 100% you would have without tithing. **90% in obedience to God goes farther than 100% in disobedience.**

When we don’t tithe, we don’t have enough and that leads to envy and greed and sin. When we tithe, we have enough so we will be content and we can give to others and bless them. Then God can trust us with even more blessing. Someone said, **“If he can give through us, he can give to us.”** He wants to bless us so we can be a blessing. It starts here with us bringing our tithes to the Lord.

Is there hope for our finances even in a bad economy? Yes, when we are obedient and bring our tithe and offerings to the Lord. When we obey God we are relying upon Him as our source, not the economy. We are relying on heaven’s economy, not the American economy. We are relying on eternal and spiritual principles rather than upon capitalism or some other economic theory or principle. I’m trusting the one who promised to meet my needs according to his riches in glory. I’m trusting the one who said, “test me in this and see if I won’t throw open the windows of heaven and pour out so much blessing you won’t have room enough for it.”

I believe if we will honor God by paying our tithes...if we will return to him by giving offerings and giving our time and talents to him, giving the firstfruits of our income and our increase – I believe there will be a new sense of liberty and freedom and blessing in our lives. After all, we are only talking about giving God what already belongs to him.

The last verse of Malachi 3 says, “**And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.**” **Malachi 3:18** I’m not one of those who believes that every Christian is going to be wealthy if we obey God and pay our tithes. I am one of those who believes that God will honor his word and will bless you with increase and provision as you obey him. I believe economic hard times are coming, but I believe the Lord will provide for his people if we will continue to put our trust in him and obey him. Will you trust him? Will you obey him and his word?

How many need a financial miracle right now? You need a job, a raise, a financial breakthrough. We are going to pray for you. Are you ready to return to God and obey him in your finances and your giving? If you are ready to obey God I believe He is ready to honor his word.