



“Tithing”

Common Questions about Tithing

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1. What is the tithe?

The word “tithe” comes from an Old English root meaning “one tenth.” It is the common English translation for the Old Testament Hebrew *asar* word group. The tithe was an offering of one’s agricultural income to the Lord as an expression of thanks and dedication. In the Old Testament agricultural economy, tithes were paid not in cash or gold but in crops or livestock, for only the agricultural fruit of the promised land was to be tithed—not other forms of income. Although today we commonly think of the tithe as “10 percent,” apparently there are three tithes in the Old Testament, two every year and a third every third year, or an average of 23.3 percent of one’s annual produce from the land. There was also provision for freewill offerings and personal giving above and beyond the tithe, so that the tithe never stood alone. The idea of the tithe is still present in the New Testament (Matthew 23:23), but it is never explicitly applied to believers. Instead, almost all Christians are called to more extravagant freewill giving in response to the gospel of the Lord Jesus, based on faith in God as provider (2 Corinthians 9:6-10).

2. Is the tithe the standard of Christian giving for us today, or was it just the standard for Old Testament Israel?

Neither. The tithe was never the standard of Old Testament generosity, nor is it the standard of Christian generosity today. Tithing may be a helpful guideline as we strive to develop a lifestyle of even greater giving, but it was and is possible to tithe faithfully while neglecting true, biblical generosity (as Jesus pointed out to the Pharisees; see note on Matthew 23:23). In the Old Testament and today, God usually requires far more from his people than the 10 percent we typically assume.

3. Didn’t Jesus affirm that Christians should tithe?

No; in fact, Jesus expected much more from his followers. His command to love others as we love ourselves and as he loved us (John 13:44) is a far higher standard than the tithe. It is interesting to note that none of the four passages in the New Testament where the tithe is mentioned requires Christians to tithe. Instead of settling for 10 percent, we should note the command to give generously and radically, just as Jesus gave to us: loving God with all he had and loving his neighbor—even his enemies—as himself, just as Jesus did (Matthew 22:37-40; 2 Corinthians 8:9; 1 John 3:16-19). So the scarce mention of the tithe in the New Testament is evidence not that God expects less of us

today, but that far more is possible. The tithe is still a helpful guideline insofar as it reminds us to give proportionally to the Lord as he blesses us, since he owns it all anyway. But by New Testament standards, settling for 10 percent can be a recipe for condemnation from Jesus if we are neglecting true generosity, just as it was for the tithing Pharisees (Matthew 23:23).

4. Will God really “throw open the floodgates of heaven” if I start to tithe?

Perhaps. But we must recognize that this oft-quoted passage (Malachi 3:10) was written not as a blanket promise to Christians in all times and all places, but to a very specific group of people in history—the impoverished, insecure Israelites living in the land after their return from exile in Babylon. Many “health-and-wealth” teachers today misuse this passage to guarantee that God will give us prosperity in this life if we only start to tithe, especially to their ministries.

5. I live off welfare money and/or Social Security checks. Should I tithe from this money? I don’t work, but I do receive disability compensation. Should I tithe from this money?

Tithe no; give yes. The tithe in the Old Testament almost certainly was never meant for day laborers and those who received welfare, but only for landowners with crops. We should give to the Lord out of whatever we have (2 Corinthians 8:12), keeping in mind that 10 percent was never the standard for Old Testament giving, nor is it the standard for Christian generosity today. If welfare money or a disability check is all you have to live on and you are a Christian who wants to give generously to the God who saved you, then rejoice anytime God sends an opportunity to give to those in greater need than yourself.

6. Does the Bible teach a tithe on income or on net worth?

Income from the promised land yes, net worth no, but neither of these should stop us from giving generously. The Bible teaches that the tithe applied to crops and animals produced in the promised land, not to all income in any time and place. At the same time, the Bible never teaches a tithe on net worth. But to Christians in an age of unprecedented prosperity, these fine distinctions almost seem absurd. In a sense, the distinction between income and net worth is artificial, because God owns it all in any case and has put all of it in our hands to see what we will do with it.

Should I tithe from my take-home pay or my gross income?

Hairsplitting is not the aim of Christian generosity. For most Americans, neither of these options will fulfill our giving obligations. God has always required much more than a fixed percentage—whether of net or gross income—from his people. When we consider that he has redeemed us through his Son’s sacrifice, how can we then let inconsequential things like the tax structure (in which the government claims its share of our paychecks first) keep us from giving generously to God? Instead of asking, “How much am I required to give?” why not ask, “How much can I give?” For those who choose to tithe as a starting point for disciplined generosity, let us consider this question: Who deserves the first and best part of our income, the government or the living God? (The answer is clear; see Proverbs 3:9.)

7. **Can a portion of my tithe go to other Christian ministries?**

Probably not, for several reasons: (1) The tithe never was nor is the standard of generosity for God's people. Generosity to the Lord is much more than giving a fixed percentage. (2) In general, it is best to give to the church first. The church is Christ's bride, for whom he gave his life (Ephesians 5:25). Christian ministries do very important and necessary gospel work, but they typically are "independent" and rarely accountable to a community of believers committed to one another's welfare and spiritual growth as is the local church. Moreover, ministries do not have the authority or range of responsibilities that God specifically placed on the institutional church (Matthew 16:17-19). Because it is God's appointed institution, the church is the first and worthiest recipient of Christian giving. So, as long as we are giving to the church, we should feel free to give to any worthy Christian ministry. If you have concerns about possible misuse of offerings or neglect of an important ministry by your church, there are certain biblical steps that you should follow (Matthew 18:15-17). Rather than simply redirecting your tithe elsewhere, (a) submit to your church leadership by continuing to give in the interim, (b) raise your concerns directly with a pastor or church officer and (c) pursue the correction of financial misuse in cooperation with the church leadership.

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