

Giving and Generosity ***Living in the Relational Church IV:***

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"Follow the money!" The haunting words from Deep Throat, the unidentified Watergate informant for the Washington Post, proved to be the critical voice that unraveled the corruption in the Nixon White House.

I find it an interesting echo of Ecclesiastes 10:19, "Money is the answer for everything."

When people ask me why do all the TV preachers sound the same, I point them to Ecclesiastes. When I'm asked why organized religion works the way it does, I point them to Ecclesiastes. When they ask me how do I know what my heart really wants, I point them to Ecclesiastes.

In human terms, money is the answer for everything. How you view it and how you use it will show you what you understand about Father's work in your life.

Of all the questions I get about relational church life, "What do you think of tithing?" ranks right at the top with "What do we do about children?" Admittedly I traverse financial waters with great care since nothing has been more abused among God's people in our day.

Usually those who speak about it do so only to get their hands on more of it for themselves. So let me offer this one caveat at the beginning: There is no financial crisis here, and please don't send us any contributions because you think this is a veiled appeal to do so. It is not, and if that is hard for you to believe, please feel free not to read any further.

So much of what has been said in this area either burdens people with guilt or bribes them with false promises of God giving them more money in return. I'll risk being misunderstood because I want you to discover the joy and freedom of seeing Father's hand in your giving just as much as any other area of your life. I don't pretend to have all the answers here nor to offer a complete treatise on this subject, but I do want to share with you where the journey has led me in this area.

Jesus and Money

Jesus spoke about money as much as he spoke about anything except relating to his Father. He said nothing reveals our affections more than that which we compile as treasure, or that which we freely share at God's bidding.

Even a cursory reading of the Gospels reveals that he talked about it more than he talked about church, worship or even prayer. He warned us not to judge God's fairness or generosity by it, and made it clear that the abundant life had nothing to do with the amount of money or possessions we have, but the simplicity of living in the freedom of his righteousness, the rest of his peace and the fullness of his joy.

The pursuit of money and the worries it creates has the capacity to choke out the life of the kingdom in any of his followers. It is better to give it away to the poor than let it own your heart.

He also said that wise hearts would use money as a tool for God's purpose in the world. It can open doors and minister to the needs of many, when it doesn't own you. Use it responsively to him and it can be a blessing to you and others. Hoard it and its promise quickly turns into a cage for a darkened heart.

With capacity for such good or such evil, how does he want us to handle our money?

Storehouse Tithing

This used to be real easy for me. Growing up I was taught that ten percent of everything I received belonged to God. I owed him that ten percent. That is tithing.

How I paid that tithe was to donate it to whatever local congregation I attended. Those in charge were free to use it for the needs of the fellowship--to procure a facility, to pay salaries, to fund its programs and also to help people in need. I was not free to give it where God might lead. If I wanted to give anywhere else, it would have to be above my tithe. That is storehouse tithing.

To be honest, I was never fully comfortable drawing the Biblical lines to that conclusion. Certainly Abraham tithed as an act of gratefulness to God even before the law was given. It helped pay for the upkeep of God's Temple and the Levites who cared for it. It was shared with the needy and also used to fund feasts for celebrating God's life among them.

Admittedly, however, the New Testament is conspicuously silent about tithing as a practice of the early church. Nowhere is it encouraged and yet the generosity demonstrated by their giving to each other has not been rivaled since.

For too many years I missed that, however, blinded by the pragmatic need to fund the facilities, salaries and programs of the institutions I served. Without committed tithers we simply could not have funded the things we thought were so important to us. It was easy to co-opt the Old Testament tithe as an easy proof-text for our needs.

A Different Way of Giving

My conclusion now is quite different. No, I don't believe tithing is wrong, I simply view it now like everything else in the Old Testament. It is only a shadow of something far more real that God wanted to show us in Jesus. And, like every other old covenant shadow, when you discover the real substance of giving you will see that tithing is a cheap substitute by comparison.

"You mean I don't have to tithe?" I love the question, because it belies the motives that tithing too often taps. It's a bill--an obligation we owe God. Once it is paid, we can run off with the remaining 90% and spend it however we like. Not to give it, in Malachi's words, is to rob God of that which we owe.

The New Testament paints a far different picture. Jesus never mentioned tithing as a practice for his followers. And though giving is a constant theme of Acts and the Epistles, tithing is again not mentioned. Instead we see something else at work. Believers gave not because they had to, but because they chose to. Those who had been invited into relationship with the Living God, were so shaped and blessed by his generosity, that they responded to others around them with that same generosity. The giving that resulted outstripped anything tithing could ever accomplish.

Even when Peter addressed Ananias for lying about the money he was giving, he made it clear that the church had no claim on it. "Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal?" (Acts 5:5)

When Paul took up a collection for the famine-ravished believers in Jerusalem, he made it clear that it was not his command, but merely an opportunity. " Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." (2 Cor. 9:7)

Ultimately, giving because we have to is not really giving at all. It is just another obligation to meet and a far cry from what God really had in mind all along.

Giving Generously

In fact Paul was shocked at how the Macedonians, who were in the midst of poverty themselves, responded to the need. "Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints." (2 Cor. 8:2-4)

Does that sound like tithing? Would tithing have resulted in such overwhelming action? I don't think so! Here were believers who were so blessed by God's generosity toward them that even out of their own need they could respond with generosity to others.

I love how the New Testament puts the focus where it belongs. We don't give money to God so God will act generously toward us. Rather, he begins the cycle. Having overwhelmed us with his generosity, we will respond in the same way to others.

But there is a catch here, isn't there? What if I don't feel God is being generous with me, do I still give to others? Paul said that giving and receiving in the body does go in cycles. Those who have plenty today, might well be those who in need tomorrow. The goal is to share so that no one has too much or too little.

But how much is too much and how little is too little. While I think it's obvious that almost every one of us who live in first-world countries are incredibly wealthy financially by world standards, so few people really know God's generosity. Why?

Generosity God-Style

The reason so few people really understand God's generosity results from two realities. First, they measure it by what they perceive to be their wants and needs. Comparing our homes, cars and toys to others in the culture leads to envy and greed. In the face of our demands God will rarely seem generous.

Paul understood God's generosity at a far deeper level than material comfort. He said he knew the secret of contentedness whether he enjoyed an abundance or whether he suffered in need. Because he was focused on God's agenda for his life and not his own, he saw God's hand of generosity in every area of his life. Look at how he described it: "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work." (2 Cor. 9:8, emphasis mine)

I have lived most of my spiritual life like a son of a stingy Father. Not ever having all I wanted and often being disappointed by his response to some of my most fervent prayers, I lived with a nagging disappointment in God. Yes, I could express thanks and praise as well as the next person intellectually, but underneath I felt cheated and was continually frustrated by the things he did not do that I expected of him.

It has only been in the last six years as God has dismantled my agenda for my own life, that I have been able to see a glimpse of what Paul is talking about here. Because I was so busy trying to get God on my page, I couldn't see the incredible things he was doing in my life every day. When I start everyday without my own preferences for how I want things to turn out, I find myself constantly amazed at what God is doing in my life and genuinely thankful at every turn. If he doesn't give me something, it's because I really don't need it.

This is why our expectations are disappointed so often. It's not because God doesn't care about us, but because he is committed to freeing us from the tyranny of self. Only then can we enjoy God's resources and discover just how generous he is.

How Does It Work?

Living in God's generosity leads to a life of generosity with our money, our time and our spiritual life. Since God takes such incredible care of us we no longer have to live self-focused lives. Thus it will be easier for us to see ways God wants us to help others.

Remember the Macedonians who gave so much even though they were in need? Did that happen because they were committed to tithing? No. As Paul wrote, "They did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will." (2 Cor. 8:5)

Simply, they heard God and did what he asked them. It was greater than Paul could conceive. Those who are convinced that giving to God is nothing more than paying ten percent as an obligation, will never understand giving like this.

A few times every year, I get calls from people whom God has led out of abusive institutions. They tell me that God has led them to send their tithe from now on to Lifestream. My answer is always the same. After thanking them for their thoughtfulness, I steer them away from any regular commitment. "If God puts it on your heart to send us something this month, please do so. If God puts it on your heart to send us something the next month, then do that. If in the following months God leads you to do something else with your gifts, then by all means do that." Never have any of those people given to us more than a month or two. Hopefully they are learning a better way to give.

A Life of Giving

Each day God wants you to taste of his generous love, and then show you how he wants to channel his generosity through you to touch others. As I see it, Scripturally you are not obligated to give that to any specific location. He will show you where to give when you are led by him and not swayed by the appeals and demands of those who always claim to be in crisis.

Those who gather in more relational settings and have no need to spend significant funds on facilities, salaries or programs, often find creative ways to see God use their generosity. They give to those in need, to extend the light of God's kingdom in the world, even to support ministry projects they feel called to aid.

They may do that together, or separately. I know one group in Australia that collected offerings into a combined account to distribute it on behalf of the group. After spending six weeks disagreeing over how to distribute it, they decided to give everyone their money back and let them give as they felt led. They choose to spend their time encouraging each other's faith instead of spending each others offerings.

I know others who put a specific amount of money in their wallet each month and see where God might want them to give it at serendipitous moments throughout their week.

Notice I am not saying it is sinful to give ten percent to the group you regularly gather with if God so asks you. In fact, I think people whom God has blessed who are not willing to share the financial load of that which they benefit from might well reconsider whether or not God has called them to be part of it.

But God's way of giving makes tithing a mere shadow by comparison. Those who discover God as the generous Father will give beyond ten percent, just by doing what God asks of them. What's more, because it's not a bill they pay, but an extension of his generosity, they will give with a passion that not only transfers funds, but builds relationship as well.

Why embrace the shadow, when you can enjoy the reality behind it? That holds true for so much in this kingdom, doesn't it?

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