

Should Christians tithe? (Because of the Gospel)

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, March 5, 2023
PASSAGES	1 Corinthians 4; 1 Corinthians 9; Acts 18
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:12:35 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Paul had every right to be supported by the churches he planted, and he refused to use it. Not because taking money was wrong — he says plainly that it isn't — but because he had been so undone by the risen Christ that he wanted to hand him something that cost him. That is where Christian giving actually comes from, and it is why the question “what percent?” never gets a straight answer here.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ The word *tithe* is Old English for *tenth*. The practice belonged to a country organized around temple service, with Levites who owned no land and a third-year collection for foreigners, orphans and widows.
- ◆ Hope Chapel does not teach the tithe as a legal requirement. It also does not treat ten percent as the forbidden number — Matt called that “legalistic anti-legalism,” and it is no improvement.
- ◆ Apostolic ministry looked like hunger, bad clothes, homelessness and manual labor. Paul described himself and his coworkers as the scum of the world, and he did not mean it metaphorically.
- ◆ Paul argues at length that a minister has the right to be paid — from soldiers, vineyards, flocks, an ox at the threshing floor, and the temple itself — and then says he has never used it.

- ◆ The reward he wanted was a crown he could lay at Christ's feet. Preaching earned him nothing to boast in, because he was compelled to preach. Preaching *free of charge* was the one thing he could give.
- ◆ Paul made tents when he needed to and stopped when he could. Looking for the rule in his life will frustrate you; looking for the motive will not.
- ◆ There is no rule to find because what we were given is not a rule book but a ruler — a risen Lord who, in Matt's phrase, "pumped our hearts with his own affection." Giving comes out of that or it doesn't come out of anything.
- ◆ God does not need our money and is not short. What we get is the privilege of contributing to something we were dead to and have now been brought into.

► 1:12:35

Hope Chapel is working through First Corinthians, and this week Matt folded two chapters together — four and nine — because they are about the same thing: a man giving himself away for the sake of the gospel. Chapter nine sits between the two chapters on meat sacrificed to idols, and it is not a bunny trail. Paul is holding up his own life as the argument. You have the right to eat that meat, he tells them; here is what I do with my rights. It ends with "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ."

Because the chapter touches money, Matt named the awkwardness at the top. Giving talks go bad in two directions: churches that abuse the subject, and healthy churches that get so nervous they never mention it. And most people, he said, just want the number. "Tell me what percent y'all do and I'll get over it." He warned that anyone in the room hoping for that was about to be frustrated. He would rather be honest than convenient.

Where the tithe came from

► 1:15:04

Tithe is simply the old English word for *tenth*. In Leviticus 27 the people of Israel set aside a tenth of their produce — grain, fruit, wine — and every tenth animal, with a buy-back option that cost you an extra fifth of the value. It was granular because it was a country. If you lived too far to haul a wagon of sheep and lettuce to the temple, you sold the produce, carried the money, and bought the animals when you arrived.

The tithe supported the Levites, who had no land and therefore no crops, and it fed the poor. In Deuteronomy 14 every third year a larger collection went to foreigners, orphans and widows — on top

of the standing instruction not to harvest your field to the edges, so that people with nothing could walk through and eat. “It would stay fresh on the vine,” Matt noted. The system made sense as a system.

Legalism, and the legalism about legalism

► 1:18:12

Without a temple, without theocratic Israel, without Levites, the letter of that law has nothing to attach to. So Hope Chapel, with most churches, does not teach the tithe as a requirement. But Matt immediately closed the other exit. “Some people get legalistic about being opposed to legalism,” he said — where ten percent becomes the bad number, and 9.9 or 10.1 is fine, and ten-and-a-half is better. “There’s not much spiritual improvement from just giving ten. Just saying ten is the bad number.”

He was also generous about why the habit persists: we use a base-ten number system and mental math is hard, there is a long family tradition behind it, and some people simply like the continuity with the Old Testament. None of that is wrong. It just isn’t what Paul insists on with his churches.

What apostolic ministry actually looked like

► 1:21:53

Matt started in chapter four, verse nine, where Paul has been contrasting the wisdom of the world with the wisdom of the cross.

“For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.”

1 CORINTHIANS 4:9–13 ↗

We honor Paul and Peter and John now in stained glass, inside fortress-like cathedrals, with the empire nodding along. That is not what it was. “I don’t think he meant that metaphorically,” Matt said of the hunger. Poorly dressed meant poorly dressed. Homeless meant there were stretches with nowhere to sleep. He was stoned and left for dead, lashed by authorities, shipwrecked. Matt admitted the mixed

feeling honestly: it would be something to stand in that ministry and watch a boy who fell out a window raised from the dead — “but I don’t know if I wasn’t called for it, I wouldn’t be cut out for that.”

A father, not a boss

► 1:25:31

The point of that list is not to shame the comfortable, and Paul says so.

“I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. I urge you, then, be imitators of me.”

1 CORINTHIANS 4:14–17 ↗

He is not writing as their employer. He is writing the way a father expects to be imitated by a child in the house. And what he is protecting them from matters: Corinth had recently been through a famine and was still feeling it, and most of the believers there were not wealthy. There were some — that is how house churches got large, because somebody’s uncle had a villa with a courtyard that held a few hundred people — but the church as a whole was poor and under pressure. Paul would rather carry the cost himself.

And when he says *imitate me*, Matt pointed out that he has just named the behaviors he means: bless when reviled, endure when persecuted, keep laboring while hungry and homeless, be treated like the refuse of the world — and go on treating everybody else as though they were the wise ones. Even his warning about the coming visit (1 Corinthians 4:18–21) is vulnerable rather than heavy-handed. He will come and find out not the talk of the arrogant but their power, because “the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power” — and then: shall I come with a rod, or with love and a spirit of gentleness? The Corinthians had been entertaining deceptive, polished speakers who were seeking their own glory rather than Christ’s. That is the contrast. “That’s not the way Paul ministered to them.”

Every right he had, and did not use

► 1:29:28

Chapter nine picks the thread back up as a legal defense. Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Matt drew the picture: the man who terrorized the early church and then became its greatest promoter, whose

preaching the Spirit underlined with healings — and who was so unassuming in person that polished rivals could walk into his churches, announce themselves as super-apostles, and be believed over him.

So he lays out the rights.

The right to eat and drink. The right to take along a believing wife, as Peter did. No soldier serves at his own expense; no one plants a vineyard and skips the fruit; no one tends a flock and goes without the milk. Matt put it in the most ordinary terms available: Paul plants the church at Corinth, then moves on to a town where he knows nobody and has nowhere to sleep — couldn't they at least have covered a place to stay for the first week? "Y'all, I'm not even taking money from y'all for food for the journey. But couldn't I? Doesn't that make sense?"

► 1:32:15

Then he reaches for the law — "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain" — and applies it as a principle rather than a statute, which is exactly how Matt said we should read it now. He made the logic homely: you feed the working animal partly to be humane, but also because a fed animal serves you harder. "Who wants an emaciated cow that can barely move because you're not feeding it?" And Paul supplies his own gloss — is it for oxen that God is concerned? — it was written for our sake, so that the plowman plows in hope and the thresher threshes in hope of sharing in the crop.

"If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ."

1 CORINTHIANS 9:11-12 ↗

Notice the sting in that middle line: other people *were* being supported by the church at Corinth. The man who planted it was not. And lest anyone conclude that paid ministry is the compromise, Paul says the opposite —

"the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel." Matt underlined it: "It's not a bad thing. He just doesn't do it." The normal expectation was that the churches would fund him as he planted the next one. He is the one departing from the norm.

The reward he was actually after

► 1:35:34

Then comes the sentence that sounds least Christian until you read the next one.

“But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision. For I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting. For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! ... What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge.”

1 CORINTHIANS 9:15–18 ↗

Matt did not let “any of these rights” slide by: it includes the one about marriage. “There’s nothing wrong with getting married. He could be an apostle with a Mrs. apostle.” He set that down too. And the disclaimer matters — “I’m not even bringing this up so that you would start giving me money.”

Preaching is not a flex, because Paul cannot stop. It is compulsive; the encounter on the road saw to that. So what is left that he can actually offer? The one thing he chose freely: doing it at his own expense. “This is a crown he wants to earn in glory to lay at the feet of Christ,” Matt said, “not just to brag.” He wants a reward — and we should want one too, for the same reason. “I want to give him something from me that cost me.” That, Matt said, is where the New Testament attitude toward giving starts for all of us: “I want to give him something. And I know he doesn’t need my money — but I want to give him something.”

Run like you want to win

► 1:38:43

That is also why the chapter ends where it ends. Free from all, he made himself a servant to all — a Jew to Jews, weak to the weak, all things to all people, that by all means he might save some.

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.”

1 CORINTHIANS 9:24–27 ↗

Matt’s illustration was a camera pointed at somebody asked to pretend to play soccer — the aimless putzing, the half-kick. Then tell that same person there is a championship on the line and a prize at the end. “It’s totally different. You’re animated now. You’re actually running, working up a sweat.” That is the difference between compliance and desire, and it is the whole message in one picture. “Again, this

is not about compliance,” he said. “He’s got goals.” The man was so worked on by the Christ who gave him life from the dead that he thinks creatively, outside the box: what else could I do to promote this?

The tentmaker who did not always make tents

► 1:40:35

The word *tentmaking* comes from Acts 18, where Paul arrives in Corinth, finds Aquila and Priscilla in the same trade, stays with them, works, and reasons in the synagogue every Sabbath. Read that flatly and you get a rule: ministers should hold a job and preach on weekends. But read one verse further.

“When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah.”

ACTS 18:5 ↗ (NIV)

Matt worked carefully here, because the ESV’s “occupied with the word” reads oddly — Paul was already occupied with the word, and whether he is compelled to preach cannot depend on which city Silas is in. The NIV catches it: when help arrived, he went full time. So he did construction when he needed to and dropped it when he could. He took nothing from Corinth, but Philippi did share with him, and when he had churches set money aside every week, he carried it to Jerusalem and kept none of it. The guiding question was never *what is the rule* but *how do I maximize this*, and Matt voiced him improvising: if the synagogue is going to kick me out, let’s rent a hall, why not. I’ll preach you by a river if I can. I can go without food — let’s talk Jesus. “I mean, if you’ll feed me, I’ll eat it, honestly.” Most people would quit after being stoned once; Paul’s version is “they could kill me again — I’m going to keep preaching.” “If you’re looking for rules,” Matt said, “you’re going to get really frustrated.”

Not a rule — a ruler

► 1:43:30

Underneath the black-and-white question — should they tithe, shouldn’t they, who tithes whom and how much — is a preference for being managed. “Just tell me what to do. I want to be a good American Christian.” Matt was blunt about how marketable that is: “There are religions that take pride in that. Here’s our book. Here’s our rule book. Next to it there’s the supplemental rule book. There’s the extra one in the back.” What the New Testament hands you instead is a person — “someone whose mind is awake, his eyes are open, an exalted Lord — and he wants to tell you about him.” Not top-down management. Someone who interrupted our lives.

► 1:45:36

“Instead we have a ruler. Instead we have a shepherd, and he doesn’t need our help.” Earlier he had put the absurdity in a picture worth keeping: the Lord counting the offering on a Sunday afternoon, surrounded by the treasure of the hosts of heaven, turning to the angels — we didn’t do well today, I don’t know if we’re going to make it. He doesn’t need it. But as his body we still care for one another, and we still get to contribute.

► 1:46:53

We were dead in our trespasses; his death became ours, his resurrection put its life in us, and that same power “pumped our hearts with his own affection. We are animated by his power.” Now the Father is our Father. He requires no logistical assistance from any of us. What we have is freedom, and lives we can spend promoting a message that changed us — “to our hearts’ content.” That is worth money, and it is worth more than money; Matt listed the other currencies plainly: time, energy, social capital, and the willingness to feel undignified.

Worth everything, kitchen sink and all

► 1:47:47

Which brings the answer back around to the question nobody got a number for. If you don’t know Christ yet, he said, the arithmetic is even simpler: “It’s worth it to lay down whatever stands between you and him. Dignity, pride, unforgiveness, hurts that you have. Nothing’s worth holding on to death for.” And then the trade, stated as the actual bottom line of the whole message: “in exchange for his life, it’s worth it to sell everything, to get rid of everything, throw out everything, kitchen sink and all, for this chance, for the privilege of knowing him. That’s our attitude about giving around here.”

He knew he had run around the question — “I know that was a little bit circumspect, but that’s it. We get to know Jesus. Do you want to promote the gospel? We can.” Anyone still wanting the mechanics of what Hope Chapel actually does with tithes and offerings was pointed to the congregational meeting on March 22 at 6 p.m., dinner beforehand. (Newcomers, he admitted, tend to notice how many meetings this church has. “We are. We are.”) He closed by praying the one thing the message had been arguing for all along: fix our eyes on Jesus, and let us be transformed by the interaction with our Lord.

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- [1 Corinthians 11:1](#)
- [Leviticus 27:30–33](#)
- [Deuteronomy 14:28–29](#)
- [1 Corinthians 4:9–13](#)
- [Acts 14:19](#)
- [Acts 20:9–12](#)
- [1 Corinthians 4:14–17](#)
- [1 Corinthians 4:18–21](#)
- [1 Corinthians 4:20](#)
- [1 Corinthians 9:1–2](#)
- [1 Corinthians 9:3–7](#)
- [Deuteronomy 25:4](#)
- [1 Corinthians 9:8–10](#)
- [1 Corinthians 9:11–12](#)
- [1 Corinthians 9:14](#)
- [1 Corinthians 9:15–18](#)
- [1 Corinthians 9:19–23](#)
- [1 Corinthians 9:24–27](#)
- [Acts 18:1–4](#)
- [Acts 18:5 \(NIV\)](#)
- [Philippians 4:15–16](#)
- [1 Corinthians 16:1–3](#)
- [Acts 19:9](#)

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Be honest about your first reaction to the question in the title. Were you hoping for a number, and what does that hope tell you about how you think about God?
2. Matt named two ditches — legalism about the tithe, and legalism about avoiding it. Which one are you more likely to fall into, and why that one?
3. Paul spends most of a chapter proving he has a right, and then declines it. Where do you have a right you could lay down for someone else's sake, and what would it cost you?
4. Paul wanted a crown he could lay at Christ's feet — something given freely, that cost him. What could you give that would actually cost you something?
5. Beyond money, Matt listed time, energy, social capital and dignity as things we can spend on the gospel. Name one of those you will spend this week, and on whom.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_2Nl2YvgNE&t=4355s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.