What About The Tithe?

Five myths about the tithe, a widow's two coins, and six words for how Christians give

SPEAKER	Geno Hildebrandt
DATE	Sunday, January 24, 2021
PASSAGES	Mark 12:38-44; Matthew 23:23-24; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2; 2 Corinthians 8:1-3; 2 Corinthians 9:6-7; Genesis 14:18-20; Romans 6:14; Romans 13:8
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:01:05 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Jesus did not teach his followers to tithe. He sat by the offering box, pointed at a widow who gave everything, and asked for *all* of us. Set free from the law, we give as the Spirit directs, as an expression of a relationship with God – which turns out to be both harder than ten percent and far freer.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Faithful, conservative teachers land on opposite sides of tithing, so if you are confused you have good reason to be. Jesus' words about the tithe were descriptive, not prescriptive.
- In Matthew 23 the tithe is a foil for hypocrisy. Jesus' real teaching on giving is the widow's two coins in Mark 12: not ten percent but one hundred.
- The wrong question is "how much should I give?" The right one is "how much can I keep for myself, and what do you want me to do with all I have?"
- Your gift belongs to God, not to the church. Support your local church because it is yours, and give every dollar with a sense that the Spirit directed it.
- Tithing came before the law, and its root idea is that worship should be costly. But Christians are not under law; they are bound to love.
- God will not withhold blessing if you give less than ten percent. He loved you before you had a wallet; giving is an addition to the relationship, not its price.

- Paul's collection for Jerusalem gives six words for Christian giving: consistently, sacrificially, proportionally, freely, spiritually, joyfully.

▶ 1:01:05

Before the message Geno urged everyone to the Friday prayer gathering, then gave the microphone to two women stirred during worship. Elodia had sung Psalm 124 – "blessed be the Lord who would not give us up" – and wanted someone to hear it: "You may think I've messed up too many times. He will not give you up." The goodness that follows us in Psalm 23:6 is a pursuer, she said, running us down. Amy Cogdell, noting it was a day of prayer for Christian unity, prayed for revival across the whole body of Christ: unity "is not a nice extra thing. It is essential to evangelism."

Clearing the fog

▶ 1:06:49

Geno's subject was tithing, and he promised that by the end the fog would lift into "a vision for giving that is full of grace and freedom" – "words that don't often go together."

▶ 1:07:56

John Piper taught that Jesus endorses tithing: "don't neglect it." John MacArthur says New Testament believers are never commanded to tithe. Both are Bible-believing, theologically conservative pastors. "What gives?" Geno sided with Matt Chandler: Jesus' words about tithing were *descriptive* – talking about something – not *prescriptive*. "If you're confused, you have good reason to be confused."

▶ 1:10:09

So, five myths: Jesus taught that I should tithe. Ten percent satisfies God. My tithe belongs to the local church. Tithing is in God's law, so I must give ten percent. If I don't give ten percent, God won't bless me. "Some of you are going, did he say that? Yes I did, and I think I can back it up."

Myth 1: "Jesus taught that I should tithe"

▶ 1:11:18

The first text is the fourth of Jesus' seven woes on the religious leaders:

> "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!"
>
> MATTHEW 23:23–24 ↗

▶ 1:12:27

Here the tithe is "a foil for hypocritical religious observance." Jesus has no patience for people who scrupulously tithe their garden seeds and ignore justice. So should someone good at justice and mercy also tithe? "Indeed yes, you should tithe – if you're a first-century Jew." Jesus told them to because it was the law they lived under.

▶ 1:14:20

Geno said it twice, to make sure the silence was not shock: tithing does not carry over into the lives of Christ's followers, Jew or Gentile, because they are set free from the law as the way to please God or find salvation. "The law is not our master. Christ is." That, he said, is the argument of Romans and Galatians.

What Jesus did teach: the widow's two coins

▶ 1:15:46

> "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."
>
> MARK 12:38–40 ↗

▶ 1:17:02

Then Jesus sits down opposite the treasury:

> "Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him and said to them, 'Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.'"
>
> MARK 12:41–44 ↗

▶ 1:19:29

Matthew 23 was Jesus teaching about justice. *This* is Jesus teaching about giving – deliberately drawing his disciples' attention to her. "He is not urging ten percent. He is urging one hundred percent… all in, whole hog," Geno said, recalling last week's chicken and pig. Our time, talent and treasure belong to the one who purchased our lives on the cross.

▶ 1:20:53

> *"Instead of asking how much we should give, we should be asking how much we can spend on our own lives."*

Myth 2: "Ten percent satisfies God"

▶ 1:21:26

Ten percent as a way to "get God off my back" is not love toward anyone. "I'm not here to ease your guilt, frankly. I'm here to set you free" – free to obey the conscience God has given you as you pray over your stuff. God's requirement is one hundred percent obedience. "But if you're asking for a number, I'd say ten percent is a good place to start."

▶ 1:22:50

Randy Alcorn, in *Money, Possessions and Eternity*, asks how close Jesus was to the offering box. Close enough to see two tiny coins in a shrivelled hand and know they were copper. "This passage should make all of us who suppose that what we do with our money is our own business feel terribly uncomfortable… God does not apologize for watching with intense interest." "We can say amen," Geno said, "or we can say ouch."

▶ 1:24:25

And anyone who wants to live under the law should know Israel's tithes, by one estimate, came to about 23 percent – closer to an income tax that supported government and temple.

Myth 3: "My tithe belongs to the local church"

▶ 1:25:45

"Gino, you're cutting your own throat." No: your gift belongs to God, and he will tell you where to give it – here, or to workers like Noah and Kara. Then why support Hope at all? "Because it's your church. It's yours, the place you call home." He thanked a congregation whose giving had held steady or risen through COVID.

▶ 1:28:03

The early church faced a heavy burden supporting widows (1 Timothy 5, Acts 6); caring for the poor has always been the church's work. At Hope, everyone who has asked for help since COVID began has been helped. The benevolence fund holds eight to ten thousand dollars, and Geno has had to chase people down: "Why don't you ask? We've got money."

▶ 1:30:41

Yes, there are salaries, bills and a small mortgage. "But what's most important to me is that every time you give a dollar to this ministry you have a confident sense that the Holy Spirit has directed you to do that," because "we are making disciples here, not just running a church."

▶ 1:31:48

Hope pours hundreds of thousands of dollars a year into missions without naming a number: people are told what a worker needs, they pray, and they give. Workers know each gift came from someone prompted by the Spirit, so it is "not just sustenance but encouragement."

Myth 4: "Tithing is in God's law, so I must"

▶ 1:33:24

Tithing is all over the Old Testament, but it came *before* Sinai, as a way to honor God's man:

> "And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.) And he blessed him… And Abram gave him a tenth of everything."
>
> GENESIS 14:18–20 ↗

▶ 1:34:05

The idea under the tithe is that worship should be costly to the worshipper. At Hope that shows in freedom to raise hands, dance in the aisle, or stand very still – "offer it extravagantly" – and it extends to our substance.

▶ 1:35:09

But we are free from the law:
"sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace." That does not mean the moral law is irrelevant – it shows what matters to God – but we are not bound to it for salvation or for how we give.

▶ 1:36:32

"Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." "We are guided by love and not legal strictures." If someone wants to keep the tithe as a matter between them and God, fine – "but do not for one minute think that everybody else should."

Myth 5: "If I don't give ten percent, God won't bless me"

▶ 1:37:46

That one is based in fear. "God's gonna bless you if you give nothing." Alcorn calls the tithe training wheels for giving, so if ten is out of reach, pick a percentage you can give – three, if that is it. "Better watch out, those lightning bolts are accurate," Geno joked. "But don't be afraid."

▶ 1:38:58

"He loves you without your wallet." He loved you while you were spending your substance on bad things, and he loves you the same way now. Giving is not the price of the relationship; it deepens it.

▶ 1:39:40

His picture was his own marriage. He and PJ have been married forty-two years and are still in love. Before any money changed hands they were fascinated with each other, stealing every hour they could. Later they merged their finances and set goals together, and that became exciting too – "it added to that core fascination, adoration we had for each other. It made it richer, more full." That is how money should work in our walk with God.

▶ 1:41:45

"The church doesn't depend on you. Hope Chapel doesn't depend on you. Be free to not give anything to Hope Chapel – we'll survive." Let giving be "a rich addition to your walk with God, not a life-killing rule that you have to follow."

Six words for how we give

▶ 1:43:12

For more instruction Geno turned to Paul's collection. Jewish believers in Jerusalem had been cut off from synagogue and temple and the social support that came with them, and then famine struck Judea. Paul spent years asking Greek-speaking churches to help the hungry saints.

▶ 1:44:56

> "Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come."
>
> 1 CORINTHIANS 16:1–2 ↗

Paul did not want collecting money to crowd out teaching the word. The first word: **consistently**.

▶ 1:45:55

> "In a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord."
>
> 2 CORINTHIANS 8:1–3 ↗

▶ 1:46:54

The Macedonians gave out of extreme poverty: **sacrificially**. "According to their means": **proportionally** – those who have more can and should give more, but all give sacrificially. "Of their own accord": **freely**. "He didn't browbeat them. He didn't hold up pictures of starving children. He just said the saints need help."

▶ 1:47:23

> "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."
>
> 2 CORINTHIANS 9:6–7 ↗

Deciding in the heart, after seeking God, is **spiritually**. And though people hammer others with that last line, Geno would put obedience ahead of cheerfulness – but God does love a cheerful giver: **joyfully**.

Keep the main thing the main thing

▶ 1:48:21

Consistently, sacrificially, proportionally, freely, spiritually, joyfully. Walk with God that way and the relationship grows, “and isn’t that the main thing?”

▶ 1:48:58

> *“It’s really about our relationship with God. It’s not about money. Jesus gave his life for us freely.”*

His prayer named what keeps our fists closed: “We are afraid of the future. We hang on to stuff, Lord, because we’re afraid. Let us walk before you with our hands open, trusting you, because we know of your love.”

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- Psalm 124
- Psalm 23:6
- Matthew 23:23–24
- Mark 12:38–40
- Mark 12:41–44
- 1 Corinthians 6:19–20
- 1 Timothy 5:3–16
- Acts 6:1–6
- Genesis 14:18–20
- Romans 6:14
- Romans 13:8
- 1 Corinthians 16:1–2
- 2 Corinthians 8:1–3
- 2 Corinthians 9:6–7

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. What were you taught about the tithe growing up, and how did it shape the way you feel when you give?
2. Jesus deliberately drew his disciples' attention to the widow's two coins. What does it mean for you that he watches what we give "with intense interest"?
3. Geno said the real question is not how much to give but how much to keep for ourselves. How would your decisions change if you started there?
4. Geno compared giving to the shared finances of a long marriage. Where has giving deepened your relationship with God, and where has it felt like a rule?
5. Of the six words – consistently, sacrificially, proportionally, freely, spiritually, joyfully – which one is God pressing on you, and what will you do about it this week?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Geno Hildebrandt serves Hope Chapel as senior pastor. This message followed his annual January teaching on money, and he has taught these five myths about tithing several times before. He has been married to PJ for forty-two years; she was serving in the children's ministry that morning. He spoke of helping people from the church's benevolence fund and of praying with anyone who asked after the service.

Watch the full message:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UYmKg0o-Vs&t=3665s

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.