

Giving Money to Your Church – Is It Mandatory?

First, let us distinguish between “giving” and “tithing”. Some people believe the two terms are synonymous, but they are not. As explained in the Bible, tithing is a reference to one’s *obligation* to give financially back to God. Giving, on the other hand, originates not from obligation but from a desire to share, and is not limited as to amount, type, or timing. Our belief is that you should give what you can and if that also includes tithing, then yes, tithe.

What Does the Bible Say About Tithing?

The Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments, makes numerous references to tithing. Here are just a few:

“When you have finished paying all the tithe of your increase in the third year, the year of tithing, then you shall give it to the Levite, to the stranger, to the orphan and to the widow, that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied.”
Deuteronomy 26:12

“The sons of Israel and Judah who lived in the cities of Judah also brought in the tithe of oxen and sheep, and the tithe of sacred gifts which were consecrated to the Lord their God, and placed them in heaps.” 2 Chronicles 31:6

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.” Matthew 23:23

In many religious circles, it is often said that people should tithe 10% of their income to their church, and this is confirmed when God gives Moses His commandments for the sons of Israel:

“Thus all the tithe of the land, of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the tree, is the Lord’s; it is holy to the Lord. If, therefore, a man wishes to redeem part of his tithe, he shall add to it one-fifth of it. For every tenth part of herd or flock, whatever passes under the rod, the tenth one shall be holy to the Lord. He is not to be concerned whether it is good or bad, nor shall he exchange it; or if he does exchange it, then both it and its substitute shall become holy. It shall not be redeemed.” Leviticus 27:30-33

Another aspect of tithing is when should the tithe be given? The Bible is clear that our tithing should come from our first receipts, i.e., before any other financial obligations are honored. Thus, the **first** thing we should do with our harvest is to tithe some of that harvest to our church. Numerous Scripture verses support the concept of giving to God first:

“Then it shall be, when you enter the land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance, and you possess it and live in it, that you shall take some of the first of all the produce of the ground which you bring in from your land that the Lord your God gives you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place where the Lord your God chooses to establish His name.” Deuteronomy 26:1

*“Honor the Lord from your wealth
And from the first of all your produce;
So your barns will be filled with plenty
And your vats will overflow with new wine.”* Proverbs 3:9-10

“... and that they might bring the first fruits of our ground and the first fruits of all the fruit of every tree to the house of the Lord annually, and bring to the house of our God the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, and the firstborn of our herds and our flocks as it is written in the law, for the priests who are ministering in the house of our God. We will also bring the first of our dough, our contributions, the fruit of every tree, the new wine and the oil to the priests at the chambers of the house of our God, and the tithe of our ground to the Levites, for the Levites are they who receive the tithes in all the rural towns.” Nehemiah 10:35-37

There are numerous reasons God wants us to tithe to our church first, and we think the three most important are:

1. By tithing to our church before fulfilling other financial obligations, we are declaring openly and publicly that God is first priority in our lives.
2. By tithing to God first, we avoid waiting until later when giving might become stressful instead of joyful.
3. Tithing is often a matter of faith, demonstrating that we trust God to provide for us when we put Him first.

So, did Jesus tithe? Regarding Jesus’ giving practices, the Bible provides plenty of indications that He did tithe. Perhaps the most obvious evidence is found in Matthew 5:17:

“Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.”

Since the Law required tithing and Jesus fulfilled the Law, we suspect this means yes, Jesus tithed. If the Law required tithing in a monetary fashion, Jesus honored this tradition. We also know Jesus was sinless and not a hypocrite, so any statement about giving or tithing He made would indicate what His own practice was. So, His criticism of the Scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:23 (see above) indicates not only His belief that they should tithe, but also that He tithed.

What Does the Bible Say About Giving?

Perhaps the two most important Bible verses on giving that clearly distinguish between financial tithing and giving are:

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” John 3:16

“Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.” John 15:13

Jesus not only gave His life for us, but He also used His powers to heal the afflictions of many and to feed thousands with but a few loaves of bread and some fish. These actions are certainly great symbols of sharing one’s treasure. So yes, while we think Jesus did, in fact, tithe, it is also clear that He certainly gave freely of Himself to those in need. When we can do both – tithe and give – we should.

Perhaps the most telling example of how much one should give is when Jesus discusses the subject with His disciples as they visit a local synagogue.

“And He sat down opposite the treasury, and began observing how the people were putting money into the treasury; and many rich people were putting in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent. Calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, ‘Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury; for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on.’” Mark 12:41-44

Some gave their obligatory 10% out of their abundant surplus. Some gave all they had. Who do you think God thought more highly of?

Another difference between obligatory tithing and giving is that the Bible makes it clear that not only should we give, but we should do so without fanfare or drawing attention to ourselves. In His famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus explains to everyone gathered there:

“So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.” Matthew 6:2-4

The Bible goes one step further and tells us that when we give graciously, we will, in turn, receive more than we give. Scripture tells us:

“Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed.” 2 Corinthians 9:6-8

“From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from My statutes and have not kept them. Return to Me, and I will return to you,’ says the Lord of hosts. ‘But you say, “How shall we return?” Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me! But you say, “How have we robbed You?” In tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing Me, the whole nation of you! Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this,’ says the Lord of hosts, ‘if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows.’” Malachi 3:7-10

What Should a Church Do with My Tithes and Giving?

In developing your relationship with Christ, you will learn from His ministry and the Bible, that His Church is a body, not a building. Christ’s “Church” consists of the body of believers who follow His teachings, and thus it is not any specific physical institution. So ideally, your giving should be used by your local church leadership to minister first to the spiritual and physical needs of the congregation, and then to those in the community who are in need.

Does that mean that our giving should not be used to support a building or church leadership? No, it does not mean that at all. The Bible makes it clear that the church leadership must be cared for. Having a permanent home for the congregation and growth of the congregation are clearly in God's grace. Here is what the Bible says about supporting our local church leadership:

"The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing,' and 'The laborer is worthy of his wages.'" 1 Timothy 5:17-18

Additional supporting Scripture on these two important topics can be found in II Kings 22:4-6, I Corinthians 9 and Nehemiah 13:10-14.

However, in using the congregation's tithes and giving, Church leaders should not become millionaires with private planes and fancy cars at the expense of serving the needs of the congregation, the local community, or the ministries of qualified missions. Nor do churches need to be monuments that serve one's pride. In the time of Moses, God was pleased with tents in the desert. And know that Jesus and His Apostles spent more time teaching on street corners than they did in the Temple.

What If I Cannot Afford to Tithe or Give?

Another question that often comes up around tithing and giving is: "If I cannot afford to tithe or give to my church, should I still seek a strong relationship with Jesus?" We would argue that yes, having a strong relationship with Jesus, if indeed it is genuine, is more important than tithing or giving to your church. While God loves a cheerful giver, we suspect He would always take a true believer over someone who just puts money in the collection plate on Sunday. Jesus alludes to this concept in His parable of The Lost Sheep:

"So He told them this parable, saying, 'What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.'" Luke 15:3-7

That said, we should fully realize that having a strong, genuine relationship with Jesus Christ and not giving to our church are mutually exclusive. As noted above, Jesus was more impressed with the woman who gave a cent than those who gave far more, because the cent given was very significant to the woman – it was all she had.

So, if all you can give to your church is a buck, give it gladly and you will be greatly rewarded. Remember, it is not the size of your gift that matters to God, but rather how much the size of your gift matters to you as you give it gladly to glorify God. God is more glorified if your gift represents a hardship for you and you still give it gladly, than if your gift is large but not something you would ever notice missing.

Unlike tithing, giving is not limited primarily to money. Giving of our time by helping set up church services, sharing the Gospel with others, reaching out to fellow believers in fellowship, participating in Bible studies and sharing our insights, are all examples of giving to God. The list of ways we can glorify God is almost endless and rarely involves money. And as we have noted, God always gives back more in return.

Here is something to ponder. Perhaps the reason someone cannot afford to give back to God is because they never gave to God in the first place. Perhaps it is because they put everything – all their wants, needs and desires – first, and God's last.

Is There a Limit to How Much We Should Give?

God gave us the universe and the planet we live on. He gave us the human race and everything we need to sustain life. God gave us His only begotten Son who in turn sacrificed His sinless blood to pay the penalty for our sins, so for those who believe in Him, eternal life in heaven is given. Also, for those who believe in Him, He provides all we will ever need in accordance with His will. We will never be able to outgive God.

So no, there is no limit on what we should give back to God. We say this for two reasons:

1. If we truly believe in God, then we will also believe He will provide for us.
2. What we freely and cheerfully give to God will come back to us many-fold.

How do we know God will provide for us? Here is what Jesus tells us in Matthew 6:25-33 – and remember, Jesus is incapable of lying:

“For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life? And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith! Do not worry then, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear for clothing?” For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

And how do we know God will reward our cheerful giving many-fold? We discussed this concept above but here is another Scripture verse that exemplifies it perfectly:

“Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure--pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return.” Luke 6:38

We believe this verse does not imply that if we give a dollar back to God, He will give us a dollar in return. Instead, we believe that what we tithe and give to God – and by extension to the body of fellowship and believers in His Son Jesus Christ - will be rewarded back to us in proportion to God’s standard of measurement. And God can be far more giving than we could ever hope to be.

Why is tithing and giving so important to God? After all, as the Creator, He already owns everything in the universe – including what we think belongs to us. Is it because our giving and tithing demonstrate how much we love Him? No, not at all. God knows how much we love Him by what is in our hearts, not our wallets. No, what we are willing to give to God out of our treasure demonstrates how much we trust Him to provide for us out of His. Put another way, we likely give to God in proportion to how much we trust Him to provide for us in return.

By choosing and living a life in Christ, you will become truly blessed by God. How blessed will be between you and God. We pray that you will be so touched, you will feel completely free to give God whatever He might ask of you, trusting that you will be abundantly provided for in return.

We encourage you to tithe and give freely and generously to God through your local church. We also encourage you to make sure your contributions are wisely used, as you and God intend them to be. You should know and be completely comfortable with how your contributions are being spent. (But remember this: performing good deeds and giving money do not gain you access to heaven. If your church leadership says otherwise, they are not speaking the truth of God.) If you have any doubts about how your gifts are being used, read the four Gospels and really get to know Christ. Then ask yourself, “Is this how He would use my gifts?”