

8 November 2015

Grown Up Giving

Mark 12:41-44; Exodus 35:20-29

Mark 12:41-44

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.'

Exodus 35:20-29

Then all the congregation of the Israelites withdrew from the presence of Moses. And they came, everyone whose heart was stirred, and everyone whose spirit was willing, and brought the LORD's offering to be used for the tent of meeting, and for all its service, and for the sacred vestments. So they came, both men and women; all who were of a willing heart brought brooches and earrings and signet rings and pendants, all sorts of gold objects, everyone bringing an offering of gold to the LORD. And everyone who possessed blue or purple or crimson yarn or fine linen or goats' hair or tanned rams' skins or fine leather, brought them. Everyone who could make an offering of silver or bronze brought it as the LORD's offering; and everyone who possessed acacia wood of any use in the work, brought it. All the skilful women spun with their hands, and brought what they had spun in blue and purple and crimson yarns and fine linen; all the women whose hearts moved them to use their skill spun the goats' hair. And the leaders brought onyx stones and gems to be set in the ephod and the breastpiece, and spices and oil for the light, and for the anointing-oil, and for the fragrant incense. All the Israelite men and women whose hearts made them willing to bring anything for the work that the LORD had commanded by Moses to be done, brought it as a freewill-offering to the LORD.

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A few weeks ago, I finished a sermon series on how to read the difficult book that call the Bible. I began by asking you what you wondered about, and one of you asked, "How do we know which laws from the Old Testament we're supposed to follow?" It's an important question, because a lot of the Old Testament consists of laws – some of which sound pretty good and some of which sound frankly screwy. So we dealt with that. In essence, I said that the Old Testament laws must be regarded as an early stage in Israel's journey of faith – a journey that would ultimately lead to the new covenant in Christ, a covenant in which legalistic faith has been replaced. This sounds pretty drastic – as if I'm just dismissing a quarter of the Bible – but it's no more or less than what Paul says in Galatians. The law, he says there, is still important as a guide toward Christ, but we are no longer subject to the law as law. So the answer to that question – "Which laws do we have to follow?" – is that we are no longer bound to *any* of them.

That's what I said three weeks ago. Now I have to live with it. So today – as we approach our stewardship and pledge season – how in the world am I supposed to preach a tithing sermon?

You see my problem. Where does the idea of the tithe – giving ten percent of our income to the church – come from? The law. Take Leviticus 27:30: *All tithes from the land, whether the seed from the ground or the fruit from the tree, are the LORD's; they are holy to the LORD.* So what do I do? Of course I could do what most preachers and *every* denominational leader does: make an exception for this one. In my five decades of hearing tithing sermons, I have never heard a sermon that didn't imply or state openly that *this* law still applied. We're supposed to give ten percent of our income because GOD SAYS SO! You've heard that, too, I imagine.

I do sympathize. As you've probably also heard in those sermons, if every member of the church gave 10% we'd have no financial worries. We'd have a surplus. We could pay our support staff a living wage and offer something more than token benefits. We'd have enough money to support ministry that now I can only dream of. We could buy some of those run-down houses across from our parking lot, rehab them with our own labor, and turn them into low-cost transitional housing for people trying to break out of homelessness or women from the Women's Community trying to put a new life together. It would be great. But I can't do it. I can't tell you to tithe because it's God's law. We are no longer under the law; instead, the law is a tutor, a guide, a first step toward something deeper.

What I *can* do is tell you how that works by telling you some of my journey. Like many of you, I was taught as a child to tithe. It was definitely presented to me as God's law. I got \$1.20 allowance every week. The twenty cents was my tithe. (I know: it's more than a tithe, but if I'd gotten \$1.10 and only given ten cents, that would have been a penny short of my eleven cent tithe, and we couldn't do that. So I got \$1.20. If I had the change, I could give just twelve cents, but if not, I was to give the whole twenty.) When my allowance went up, so did my tithe. It was not a question. And I internalized that. When I was in college, my grandfather died and left all his grandchildren \$10,000 in his will. I gave a thousand to the University Baptist Church of Shawnee, Oklahoma. Impressive? Maybe, but for what it's worth, I didn't need the money. I was on scholarship and had a job. The rest of the inheritance just went into savings.

It was when I was in seminary and began reflecting more deeply on the relationship of the Old and New Testaments that it first occurred to me that it was inconsistent to tell people that tithing was a law of God. We didn't have to obey the law of circumcision. It was all right to eat bacon. If we weren't under those laws, we couldn't really pretend that tithing was different. But, I tithed anyway. It was what I did. But again, it wasn't a huge sacrifice. Seminary was cheap, and I was married to a nurse. We had enough.

Then things changed. After seminary I got a teaching job, and then lost it. I ended up working odd jobs for minimum wage and substitute teaching in Oklahoma for considerably *less* than minimum wage. And then Rebecca got laid off. We had no more savings, but we had three small children. Some months we survived only because our parents bailed us out. Did I tithe? No, I didn't tithe! But I did still give to the church. It hurt, but I still did it, what little I could. What I gave meant nothing to the big church we attended then, but it didn't matter. I gave, and every \$25 check I wrote to the church was a greater sacrifice than that easy thousand I had given ten years earlier. That year, I think, was when I started to grow up as a giver. I didn't give because I had to or out of habit. I didn't give because the church needed it. I certainly didn't

give out because I had it to spare. I gave because I discovered I couldn't not give. I could not receive an income, however small, without giving some back.

Here's what I think: I think the Jesus who stood by the temple money box watching first the rich men dump in their surplus and then the poor widow drop in her two coins – *that* Jesus saw me tithe my inheritance in the 1980s and said, "Whee." But that same Jesus saw me grit my teeth and write my tiny checks in the 1990s and said, "Now you're starting to get it."

Here's what's wrong with teaching tithing as a law. First, it's a law. And the thing about a law is that all that matters is whether the thing's done or not. The person who tithes a large amount that he'll never miss has obeyed the law, and the person who gives one percent that she can't really spare – she hasn't. But that's not how it works under the new covenant. To Christ, why we give and in what spirit we give are all that matters. And here's the second thing that's wrong with tithing as a law: it makes it all about money. *And genuine giving is not.* Let's look back at the picture of giving that we read earlier from Exodus. It starts out like this: *And they came, everyone whose heart was stirred, and everyone whose spirit was willing, and brought the LORD's offering to be used for the tent of meeting, and for all its service, and for the sacred vestments. So they came, both men and women; all who were of a willing heart.* And it goes on to say that those who had gold and silver brought gold and silver. Those who had jewelry brought jewelry. And those who had any of the materials that they would need to make the tabernacle brought those: wool, leather, yarn, wood. If they had it and it was needed, they brought it. But it goes on: *All the skilful women spun with their hands, and brought what they had spun in blue and purple and crimson yarns and fine linen; all the women whose hearts moved them to use their skill spun the goats' hair.* Giving is not just about money, not even about physical offerings. People who had a skill, brought their skill. Whatever they had, if it could be of use, they brought it: *all who were of a willing heart.*

That's what grown up giving looks like. It's not about how much; it's about how and why. It's not about law; it's about participation in something larger than ourselves. It's not about how much the church needs; it's about us – about whether or not we are the sort of people who give what we have.