

## **GENEROUS GIVING: THE ANTIDOTE TO IDOLATRY**

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In our first lecture we highlighted key texts in Scripture that demonstrated the inherent goodness of wealth or material possessions. Precisely because a decent material standard of living is something God desires for human beings, his people should prioritize strategies that give opportunities for as many people as possible to get out of poverty. At the same time, in our second lecture, we noted how even more frequently the Bible warns against the seductive power of possessions. All too easily they become a rival to the God of the universe for our ultimate allegiance. It is natural, then, in this third and final lecture, to argue that the best antidote to this idolatry, or the best prophylactic against possessions ever becoming an idol, is to give a generous number of them away. In the New Testament or church age, there is no one fixed percentage that God requires of his people. What constitutes generous giving varies from person to person and setting to setting. But for many middle- and almost all upper-class

Christians, a tithe—giving ten percent to the Lord's work—is probably too little. We will divide this lecture, as a result, into three main sections. First, we will survey some of the most important texts that encourage our divestiture of surplus possessions. Secondly, we will defend the claim that what God wants today is not a fixed percentage of our income but generous, even sacrificial, giving. Finally, we will very briefly comment on how much is at stake in these commands.

## I. Giving Up Some of Our Possessions

### 1. The Old Testament

#### a. Torah

Had humanity not fallen into sin, presumably none of us would have ever had so few resources as to create hardships in life. With our original ancestors' sin, humanity became in need of redemption, including from material scarcity. We should not be surprised, then, when God's people begin to model the voluntary redistribution of their wealth to those needier than they. Abram lets Lot choose the more fertile land in Canaan so that he can grow more prosperous (Ge 13:8-11). Abram and Sarai shower material hospitality on their foreign visitors (18:3-8), in the custom of Ancient Near Eastern people more generally, and in so doing become famous for entertaining angels unknowingly (Heb 13:2).<sup>1</sup> When Jacob wants to be reconciled with Esau, he sends him a lavish gift of animals (32:13-16).<sup>2</sup> Joseph

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent study of hospitality in ancient Judaism, the Greco-Roman world and early Christianity, see Andrew Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> For a thorough study of money and property in the life of Jacob, see Paul D. Vrolijk, *Jacob's Wealth: An Examination into the Nature and Role of Material Possessions in the Jacob-Cycle (Gen 25:19-35:29)* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011).

becomes second-in-command in Egypt, only to Pharaoh, but stores grain during the seven years of plenty to be able feed the needy during the seven years of drought (41:33-36).

Various laws required the ancient Israelites to treat the poor and needy with special consideration. Sliding scales of payment allowed the poor to offer less costly sacrifices than their kin did (Lev 5:7, 11; 12:8; 14:21-22). Leviticus 19:9-10 and Deuteronomy 24:19-22 provide for farmers by allowing them to glean leftovers around the perimeters of fields that were not to be harvested. Deuteronomy 24:6, 10-13 and 17 forbid taking the means of someone's livelihood or life as collateral in a court of law (cf. Ex 22:26-27),<sup>3</sup> while daily wages had to be paid regularly and on time (Lev 19:13; Dt 24:14-15). God is consummately the one who "defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing." (cf. Ex 22:20-21; Dt 14:29; 16:11, etc.). Even Christians today who have never been literal refugees or migrant workers should realize that they are true citizens only of heaven (Php 3:20), so that their national loyalties should always take a back seat to concern for their Christian brothers and sisters of all countries.<sup>4</sup>

When Israel will become a monarchy, its kings must not amass too many possessions (Dt 17:16-17). People may eat what they need from another's garden or field but they can't bring a basket to take away with them more than they need at that moment (Dt 23:24-25). Most importantly, honest weights, measures and scales must all be used to avoid the temptation to treat the rich with inappropriate deference while discriminating against the poor (25:13-16).

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<sup>3</sup> David L. Baker (*Tight Fists or Open Hands? Wealth and Poverty in Old Testament Law* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009], 275) observes that ancient Near Eastern law primarily provided security for the lender, whereas the Hebrew laws show much more concern for the borrower.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Dean Flemming, *Philippians: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2009), 208-9.

## b. The Historical Books

Boaz again provides a model of the generosity of the godly rich. He extends numerous favors to Ruth, ultimately paying the kinsman-redeemer price for her and agreeing to marry her. But it all started with a generous allowance for her to glean in his fields. Gleaning, in particular, "involves the recipients in the work...maintaining a balance between generosity and dignity. The landowner is not burdened with extra work in being generous to the poor, and the poor have the privilege of working to supply their needs."<sup>5</sup>

We have already noted Abigail's generosity in helping David's needy troops (1Sa 25:18-35). David himself proved generous in dividing the spoils of battle even to those who had been too tired to fight and in sending some as gifts to the elders of Judah (30:23-26), though both actions of course had political motivations as well.<sup>6</sup> Later David would generously share his royal table daily with the physically disabled grandson, Mephibosheth, of his former enemy Saul (2Sa 9), in remembrance of his friendship with Saul's son, Jonathan. King Solomon may have amassed enormous wealth but he also gave amazingly generous gifts to his guests (1Ki 10:13). During a drought, Elijah pities a poor Gentile widow and her son, first by miraculously providing ongoing sustenance for them and later by raising the child from the dead (17:7-24). In 2 Kings 4:1-37, Elisha showed that Elijah's mantle had indeed fallen on him, as he miraculously provided oil for a Shunammite woman and later raised her son from the dead.

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<sup>5</sup> Baker, *Tight Fists or Open Hands?* 237. He also notes that this provision is unique among ancient Near Eastern legislation.

<sup>6</sup> "David no doubt had an eye to the future, and intended to make the spoil work on his behalf." But the elders, like those who did not fight on this occasion, had often endured raids themselves, so some reparation was appropriate. "Loyalty to the Lord created the strongest of bonds." Joyce G. Baldwin, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Leicester and Downers Grove: IVP, 1988), 169.

A unique passage occurs in 2 Kings 6:22-23, when Elisha insists that the king not kill his Aramean prisoners of war but prepare a great feast for them and then send them home. So unusual was such "enemy-love" that "the bands from Aram stopped raiding Israel's territory" for a while. Likewise today, when Christians spearhead humanitarian aid for victims of war, including the perpetrators of various atrocities, they demonstrate the supernatural, countercultural power of God's love. Gus Konkel observes, "As in the days of Elijah, Christians continue to be known for their acts of humanity in the most terrible of human situations."<sup>7</sup> As veteran international journalist Brian Stewart discovered, "there is no movement closer to the raw truth of war, famines, or crisis and the vast human predicament than organized Christianity in action."<sup>8</sup>

We commented in an earlier lecture on Nehemiah's generosity throughout the little book that bears his name. Esther exercises her rights as queen of Persia to offer two extravagant private banquets for the king and Haman to expose Haman's treachery against Mordecai and gain redress for the edict allowing the Persians to attack the Jews (Est 5:1-8; 7:1-10). When Purim was established to commemorate the Jews' successful self-defense, the festival was appropriately marked not just by feasting but by "giving of presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor." (9:22)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> August H. Konkel, *First and Second Kings* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 464.

<sup>8</sup> Konkel, *First and Second Kings*. Throughout pp. 463-66, Konkel tells the story tells the story of journalist Brian Stewart's return to Christian faith after seeing Christian ministry in Poland, El Salvador, Ethiopia and elsewhere, in the worst examples of "hell on earth," where no one else was daring to try to make a difference for good.

<sup>9</sup> "Presents of food" is literally "portions," the same Hebrew word used elsewhere for allotments or apportionments from God. The play on words thus celebrates the Jews' favorable destiny that resulted from Esther's courage and wisdom. See, e.g., Karen H. Jobes, *Esther* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 216.

### c. Poetry and Wisdom Literature

Job offers still another example of an exorbitantly wealthy person who was also amazingly generous in helping the poor around him (Job 29:12-16). Job 31:13-40 contains a lengthy asseveration of his ministries to the needy. Numbers of Psalms rehearse the lines about God as the defender of the weak and powerless (Ps 10; 12:5; 14:4, 6; 17:14-15; 22:26; 35:10, etc.). Psalm 68:5-6 proves particularly poignant: "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families, he leads forth the prisoners with singing;<sup>10</sup> but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land." (cf. also all of Ps 107) A nation's leadership has particular responsibility for carrying out these orders. Psalm 72:4 prays that the king will "defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy." Recall the similar role for godly judges in Psalm 82:3. Elsewhere the righteous are virtually defined as those who have freely "scattered abroad his gifts to the poor." (Ps 112:9) Of course, people must work hard as well, while still recognizing that without God's empowerment, nothing will prosper. Psalm 127 is particularly memorable in this respect.

In Proverbs, we discover the counterintuitive principles that "one man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed." (Pr 11:24-25) As God sees that he can trust us to be generous with a little, he may give us considerably more to steward in similar fashion (cf. Lk 16:10-12).

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<sup>10</sup> Most English translations have "prosperity." CEB has "happiness," NLT uses "joy", and GWN employs "productive lives." The word occurs only here in the Old Testament. Interestingly, John Goldingay (*Psalms*, vol. 2 [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007], 306, n. 6), cites Akkadian support for returning to the sense of the KJV's "with chains."

Proverbs 13:22 offers a rare glimpse into parental responsibility to care for their descendants, as a good person is described as leaving an inheritance for his children. Another fairly unique proverb is 19:17, which maintains that "he who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord." Normally, the Scriptures represent possessions as on loan *to us from* God, but here, perhaps because of the divine image in all humanity, the tables are turned.<sup>11</sup> In Proverbs 22:7, "the borrower is servant to the lender," illustrating the more general principle that Jesus would declare centuries later: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Ac 20:35) Numerous other proverbs reinforce these themes.

#### d. The Prophets

When the Messiah comes, he will judge the needy with righteousness and render verdicts for the poor of the earth with justice (Isa 11:4).<sup>12</sup> So God's people are called to imitate him, however imperfectly now in the present. Thus Isaiah 58:6-7 calls on them to "loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free...to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him."<sup>13</sup> Jeremiah 21:12, Ezekiel 18:4-9 and 14-17 all reinforce these points in various ways. Hosea 14:3 looks ahead to when the fatherless will find compassion. A particularly famous text in Micah 6:8 seems timelessly true: what the Lord requires of us is "to act justly and to

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<sup>11</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 15-31* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 111.

<sup>12</sup> On the messianic nature of this text, see J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah* (Leicester and Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), 103-5.

<sup>13</sup> A text that has proved central in liberation theology's struggle for improved living conditions in *this* life for the poor and oppressed. See, e.g., Mercedes García Bachmann, "True Fasting and Unwilling Hunger (Isaiah 58)," in *The Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation*, ed. Alejandro F. Batta and Pablo R. Andiñach (Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 113-31.

love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."<sup>14</sup> See also Zechariah 7:9-10. Generous giving will form a significant part of obedience to this panoply of passages.

## 2. The New Testament

### a. Jesus and the Gospels

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declares, "Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you." As Augustine perceptively commented in the fifth century, Jesus does not say what to give, nor does not turning away from someone necessarily imply not granting them exactly what they request.<sup>15</sup> We must always try to distinguish real needs from stated ones, because they are not always the same. Jesus does, however, assume that his disciples will still give alms (6:2-4). Not letting one's left hand know what one's right hand is doing (v. 3) does not justify lack of accountability in financial matters. Matthew 6:1 makes it clear that Christ's concern is that we not parade our piety in public to win the acclaim of others. But 5:16 has already explained that we must perform some good works publicly in ways that will lead others to glorify God.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, the "parable" of the sheep and the goats (Mt 25:31-46) has come to be one of the most commonly cited texts in support

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<sup>14</sup> Micah 6:8 is one of the most famous and programmatic texts in all the prophets. For an excellent recent succinct exposition in its larger context, see Esteban Voth, "What Does God Expect of Us (Micah 6-7)?" *Review and Expositor* 108 (2011): 299-306. For an analysis in light of virtue ethics, see M. Daniel Carroll R., "He Has Told You What Is Good! Moral Formation in Micah," in *Character Ethics and the Old Testament: Moral Dimensions of Scripture*, ed. M. Daniel Carroll R. and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 103-18.

<sup>15</sup> Augustine, *De Sermonibus Domini in Monte*, 67.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Charles Quarles, *Sermon on the Mount: Restoring Christ's Message to the Modern Church* (Nashville: B & H, 2011), 170-71.



of feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, extending hospitality to foreigners, clothing the naked and visiting the sick and imprisoned almost indiscriminately. Given the consistent meaning in Matthew of both "brothers" and "little ones," however, Jesus almost certainly has needy fellow Christians in mind.<sup>17</sup> But the more universal concern for suffering humanity can still readily be derived from a parable like the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37), where the dimension of physical and material care for a potentially dying *enemy* is clearly present.

Just as parents must provide for their children, so adult children must be the first line of caregivers for aging relatives. This is what made the Pharisaic practice of *korban* so heinous (Mk 7:9-13 par.); money donated to the temple treasury could now not be used for what the Lord commanded as part of honoring one's father and mother (Ex 20:12). 1 Timothy 5:8, interpreted in light of verse 4, makes the same point within the Pauline corpus.

The parable of the unjust steward (Lk 16:1-13) has so many exegetical cruxes as to have defied consensus interpretation. But it seems likely that this man is praised solely because of his shrewdness (v. 8)—behavior, in this case, which considerably reduces what the debtors owe and make the master look generous when he was not, so that he had to grudgingly admire the ploy of his servant.<sup>18</sup> But while his actions were unethical within the business system of the day, they

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<sup>17</sup> For a full history of interpretation, see Sherman W. Gray, *The Least of My Brothers: Matthew 25:31-46—A History of Interpretation* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1989). For an unpacking of this perspective, see, e.g., John P. Heil, "The Double Meaning of the Narrative of Universal Judgment in Matthew 25:31-46," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 69 (1998): 3-14; cf. Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 811; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 958.

<sup>18</sup> For a full history of exegesis and for a detailed exposition of the most probable interpretation, see Dennis J. Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom of God: A Historical, Exegetical, and Contextual Study of the Parable of the Unjust Steward in Luke 16:1-13* (Leiden: Brill, 1992). More briefly, cf. Dave L. Mathewson, "The Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke

did demonstrate generous giving to those who might have found it hard to repay loans that we may assume came with an extortionary level of interest.

The story of the rich young ruler, at least in its Lukan form (Lk 18:18-25), is shortly followed by the account of Zacchaeus (19:1-10) and the parable of the pounds (19:11-27). This triad of texts clarifies that no one size fits all with respect to Christian giving. Jesus calls the ruler to give up everything and give his goods to the poor as a prerequisite for discipleship, but he is the only person in the entire Bible so commanded. Zacchaeus voluntarily gives half to the poor and promises to restore fourfold what he has defrauded. For those not sufficiently relieved by his less drastic but still highly challenging model, the parable of the pounds pictures an almost capitalist model of investing and making more money. But the sting in the tale is that it still remains the master's money, so that all the servants have to give an account of the way they have stewarded it (cf. the similar parable of the talents in Mt 25:14-30).<sup>19</sup> Christopher Hays correctly concludes that what unites Luke's disparate treatment of wealth in his two-volume work is that disciples consistently renounce claim to all their possessions for the sake of the church and the spiritually and physically needy in the world, even if they often retain the use of some of those possessions.<sup>20</sup>

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16:1-13): A Reexamination of the Traditional View in Light of Recent Challenges," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38 (1995): 29-39. For more recent scholarship, see Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove and Nottingham: IVP, 2012), 322-29.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Pilgrim (*Good News to the Poor: Wealth and Poverty in Luke-Acts* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011], 129-30) thinks that Luke sees the Zacchaeus story as the paradigm for Christian giving. This was the amount that qualified as truly generous and sacrificial for this extremely wealthy individual, and he more than recompensed those from which he had taken money wrongly.

<sup>20</sup> Christopher M. Hays, *Luke's Wealth Ethics: A Study in Their Coherence and Character* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010). Hays also nicely surveys the wealth of other studies on this topic, especially in recent years, in pp. 1-23.

During the last week of his earthly life, Jesus observes the rich throwing large sums of money into the temple treasury, but praises the widow who gave only "two very small copper coins," because she gave a far higher percentage of her assets (Mk 12:41-44 par.). On the other hand, Mary of Bethany (Jn 12:1-8 pars.), along with Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus (Jn 19:38-42) both anoint Jesus' body, before and after his death respectively, with enormously valuable ointment and spices. The seventy-five pounds of embalming was a quantity normally spent only on someone in a royal family.<sup>21</sup> There is a time and a place for unusually lavish expenditures in devotion to Christ.

#### b. Acts and Paul

As we saw in our first lecture, Acts offers three different models for helping the poor—a common treasury (Ac 2:43-47; 4:32-37), a "deacons' fund" (6:1-7) and a special relief offering (11:27-30). Depending on the circumstances any or none of these may be the most effective or appropriate model in a situation of great need today. But what remains constant throughout the diversity of models is the concern to alleviate the plight of the needy, especially the Christian needy within one's local community and then elsewhere within the Christian world.<sup>22</sup> We also need to understand the dynamics of each model carefully. For example, the communal treasury in the earliest years of the Jerusalem church was not a failed mistake, as some have argued, but neither is it precedent for modern Communism.<sup>23</sup> It was voluntary, never coerced, it never involved the liquidation of all

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21 Cf. Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 2 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), 1163.

22 Cf. Ajith Fernando, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 191.

23 As argued, e.g., by Everett F. Harrison, *Interpreting Acts: The Expanding Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 98-99.

of someone's possessions, and it was done as a direct outgrowth of one's Christian commitment, not as an atheistic alternative to religion viewed as the opiate of the masses!<sup>24</sup>

Various people throughout Acts are praised for their generosity in helping the poor. One think especially of Tabitha (Ac 9:38) and Cornelius (10:2). When Paul gives his farewell address to the Ephesian elders in Miletus, he stresses his own model of coveting no one's possessions (Ac 20:33), of plying his trade (of tentmaking—18:3) so as not to burden the community with having to support him materially (20:34) and of giving to help the weak (v. 35a). Acts 24:17 most likely refers to the follow-up to the collection of 11:27-30, depicted in far more detail in Paul's letters.<sup>25</sup> That Luke narrates nothing further about these "gifts for the poor" may suggest that they were not received with as great a welcome as Paul had hoped.

First and Second Corinthians and Romans, nevertheless, give us considerable further insight into the collection and the principles Paul employed, which can inform our practice of Christian charity today as well. From 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, we learn that Paul instructed the church in Corinth to "set aside a sum of money" on "the first day of every week" so that when he came no collections would have to be made (v. 2). This suggests a weekly worship service on Sunday (i.e., no longer on the Jewish Sabbath), since if families simply stored monies up in their homes, collections would still have been needed.<sup>26</sup> The

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<sup>24</sup> The fullest recent analysis of these passages, which also concurs with this conclusion, is Douglas A. Hume, *The Early Christian Community: A Narrative Analysis of Acts 2:41-47 and 4:32-35* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Rightly, Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 2 (Nottingham: Apollos; Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 1001.

<sup>26</sup> Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Nottingham: Apollos, 2010), 843. On the transition from Saturday to Sunday worship, see Craig L. Blomberg, "The Sabbath as Fulfilled in Christ," in *Perspectives on the Sabbath: 4 Views*, ed. Christopher J. Donato (Nashville: B & H, 2011), 305-58.

Greek *ho ti ean euodōtai* is notoriously difficult to translate. Major suggestions have included "whatever one can afford," "in keeping with how one prospers," "to the extent God has blessed you," "as much as each can spare," and "whatever extra you earn." What is significant is that none of these renderings suggest a fixed percentage of one's income, a point we will elaborate in our next section of this paper.

Second Corinthians 8-9 unpacks these and related concepts at length.<sup>27</sup> Space prohibits any detailed examination of these chapters, but even a quick glance divulges their main themes. Giving that is blessed is sacrificial, not stingy. The much poorer Macedonian Christians have illustrated this better than the much richer Corinthians, to their shame (8:1-9). And they have done so voluntarily at their own initiative and as part of their overall dedication to the Lord (vv. 4-5), not because they were asked or because they particularly liked Paul. Giving should also be proportional, so that no one has either too much or too little (vv. 10-15; recall Ex 16:16-18). The word sometimes translated "equality" in verses 13-14 is probably better rendered "fairness" and does not suggest some bland sameness, as sometimes idealized in Communism, but that everyone at least has a fair chance of acquiring a decent modicum of property.<sup>28</sup>

8:16-9:5 outlines in some detail the process Paul envisions to maximize the likelihood of scrupulous accountability throughout the collection, transportation and delivery to the saints in Jerusalem. Such accountability should characterize all Christian money-handling today, too. In 9:6, Paul suggests that there is a reciprocal relationship

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<sup>27</sup> Perhaps the most influential work on the collection has been Dieter Georgi, *Remembering the Poor: The History of Paul's Collection for Jerusalem* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992 [Germ. orig. 1965]).

<sup>28</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Business for the Glory of God: The Bible's Teaching on the Moral Goodness of Business* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 53.

between the amount sown and the amount harvested; as in farming, so also in stewardship. In 9:7, he enunciates an ideal that Christians give cheerfully. But not being in the mood to give does not excuse Christians from the responsibility of doing so—the needs which they will meet remain irrespective of our attitudes! We should also give "generously" (v. 11; *haplotēs*), a word that even more fundamentally means "single-mindedly."<sup>29</sup> When our focus is unwavering, we are likely to give more than when it is not, so the two meanings dovetail nicely. Romans 15:26-27 demonstrate that Paul's appeal to the Corinthians proved successful. They gave enough that Paul was able to praise them, and they apparently did so cheerfully ("they were pleased"—v. 27).

Moving on from this specific collection, we can see other principles emerging in the Pauline letters. Even when there were serious debates about Law-keeping vs. Law-free Christianity, there was ready agreement on the need for all parties to remember the poor (Gal 2:10). Galatians 6:6 further reminds those taught spiritually by others to share generously with their teachers. 1 Corinthians 13:3 could seem to contradict my earlier point about giving even when we are not in the mood. Here Paul declares that "if I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship<sup>30</sup> that I may boast, but have not love, I gain nothing." The giver may gain nothing spiritually but the poor are still helped, so it is still important for the giving to take place, and there is no contradiction.

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<sup>29</sup> *BDAG*, 104, noting that while "generosity" or "liberality" has often been proposed as a rendering of several New Testament verses, including this one, the viability of this interpretation remains disputed, and concluding that "sincere concern" or "simple goodness" is probably an adequate translation here.

<sup>30</sup> Or, with a very influential textual variant, "surrender my body to the flames."

### c. Hebrews and the General Epistles

The roll call of the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 stresses that the great saints of the Old Testament often gave up considerable possessions and never inherited all that God had promised Abraham's descendants—illustrations that the prosperity preachers tend to ignore! The verse that may form the thesis of the letter of James (1:27) maintains that pure and undefiled religion is "to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."<sup>31</sup> The most poignant example of helping the neediest in James' world is precisely what he employs in 2:14-17 to illustrate the impotence of faith without a works—a fellow Christian in need of basic clothing and foodstuffs that the community refuses to help. First John 3:17-18 makes a notably similar point: "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth."

## II. Needs Too Great Just to Tithe

Between the texts surveyed in the latter part of our first lecture and those reviewed in the first part of this lecture, there can be no serious debate about the Christian's responsibility for helping those materially needier than oneself, especially if they are fellow believers (cf. Gal 6:10). God's work in the world requires still more funding. So how much is an individual believer to give? To whom are Christians to give? What about churches as they create their budgets? When civil taxes in today's world meet some of the needs that the

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<sup>31</sup> Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 83-84.

church once funded, does that relieve us of some of our responsibility to give to distinctively Christian causes? As with all of the topics in these lectures, we can only rapidly survey the key texts and come to some preliminary conclusions.

### **1. Blind Alleys**

After the shift in the ages from the Mosaic covenant to the new covenant, there is not a hint of a command in Scripture for God's people to tithe. This, of course, is an argument from silence, which could potentially prove inconclusive. Yet, among all who support tithing according to the Mosaic Law, where are those who actually are consistent and promote *all* of the relevant legislation? The Old Testament prescribed three tithes—one for the Levites, priests and temple upkeep (or the tabernacle before it), one for the annual festivals in Jerusalem (a portion of which the tithers would themselves enjoy if they attended), and an every third year offering for the treasury for the poor (Lev 27:30-33; Nu 18:8-32; Dt 14:22-29; 26:12-15). By New Testament times, this last tithe had been prorated and the obedient Jew gave 23 1/3 of his income every year for God's work in his world.<sup>32</sup> Yet one almost never hears those who support tithing for Christians supporting this amount or the way it was to be distributed!

Perhaps, then, our support for tithing—giving ten percent—should not come from the Mosaic Law but from principles established already before the Law. After all, Abram tithed his spoils from battle to Melchizedek in Genesis 14:17-24. Jacob vows to give a tithe to God in Genesis 28:22 as he sets out to Aram in search of a wife. But neither of these acts turned into a regular, systematic giving of any

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<sup>32</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (Leicester and Downers Grove: IVP, 1999, 2001), 46.



fixed percentage of these patriarchs' earnings.<sup>33</sup> If one argues that the Law does remain in force, but requires only ten percent today, because the tithe for the festivals has been abolished because they are no longer celebrated by Christians and that civil taxes or religious free-will offerings provide far more than 3 1/3 % per year per capita to help the poor, there is still the fundamental problem that the tabernacle and temple are not the Old Testament equivalents of the Christian church! They were the edifices that were required for the offering of animal sacrifices, a practice that is obsolete for Christians because Christ was the once-for-all sacrifice for us (Heb 9:26). The synagogue was the building on which the church was modeled, including the order of the services that were celebrated in each.<sup>34</sup> Nor are pastors the equivalent of Old Testament priests, since we are all priests as Christian believers (1Pe 2:5). Rabbis would be the closest parallels to pastors, but in general they were forbidden from receiving money for ministry, lest it compromise their motives! Jesus and Paul both insisted that churches pay their ministers, as we have seen (1Co 9:1-18, building on Mt 10:10/Lk 10:7), but without any hint of a percentage required of each church member.

Probably the most cited Old Testament text on tithing is Malachi 3:7-10, culminating in the ringing command to "bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house." This is a proper kind of testing of the Lord, to "see if [he] will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it." Of course, this is still under the Mosaic

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. further David A. Croteau, *You Mean I Don't Have to Tithe? A Deconstruction of Tithing and a Reconstruction of Post-tithe Giving* (Hamilton, ON: McMaster Divinity College Press; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010), 90-93.

<sup>34</sup> On the earliest centuries of the synagogue, see esp. Birger Olsson and Magnus Zetterholm, eds., *The Ancient Synagogue: From Its Origins until 200 C. E.* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2003).

economy and clearly alludes to the Deuteronomic arrangement of material blessing for spiritual obedience,<sup>35</sup> which we have seen does not carry over to the new covenant. And it is likely that "the whole tithe" is a reference to the full 23 1/3 % commanded in the Law. But verse 8 insists that the Israelites have also been "robbing God" in withholding their free-will offerings above and beyond the tithes. And all this is on top of the temple tax (Ex 30:11-16) and whatever tribute Persia required. In New Testament times, with the varying Roman taxes, Jews surrendered anywhere from 30-50% of their earnings every year in taxes, tithes and offerings.<sup>36</sup> So the next time a Christian passionately insists that a righteousness greater than the scribes or Pharisees (Mt 5:20) means going a little above ten percent a year, please remind them that it actually means at least triple this much! And yes, Matthew 23:23 does tell the Pharisees and scribes that they should have tithed "mint, dill and cumin," while not neglecting "the more important matters of the Law," but what was appropriate for Jewish leaders before the cross has no necessary bearing on Christians after Jesus' death, resurrection and the sending of the Spirit at Pentecost.<sup>37</sup>

## 2. A Proper Method

How then do we answer our questions? From Acts through Revelation, the only references to a tithe appear in Hebrews 7:1-10

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<sup>35</sup> David L. Petersen, *Zechariah 9-14 and Malachi: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 218.

<sup>36</sup> On the complexity of determining precise details, see esp. Fabian E. Udoh, *To Caesar What Is Caesar's: Tribute, Taxes, and Imperial Administration in Early Roman Palestine (63 B.C.E.-70 C.E.)* (Providence: Brown University Press, 2005), 207-43.

<sup>37</sup> All Old Testament laws must be filtered through the grid of their fulfillment in Christ (Mt 5:17). For details, see William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 171-77.

in the context of retelling the story of Melchizedek, and not in any prescriptive form. What we do see, however, is a consistent emphasis on generosity and even sacrificial giving. We must give until there are no more needy among us (Ac 4:34). If changed circumstances produce new needs, those of us with surplus possessions must give again (6:1-7, 11:27-30). We give to support our Christian teachers and others in full-time ministry (Gal 6:6; 1Co 9:1-18). We aid those in need in other parts of the world, especially fellow Christians (2Co 8-9). We recognize those who are our spiritual parents and pay them special concern and extra tribute (Ro 15:27). And elders who acquit themselves well, especially in teaching God's word, are worthy of double honor (1Ti 5:17).<sup>38</sup>

The problem with claiming that all Christians should give the identical, fixed percentage of their earnings to the Lord's work is that it would actually violate the commands to generous, sacrificial but not irresponsible giving. The wealthy businessperson who gave only ten percent would be actually quite stingy compared to the poor, retired person on a fixed income who was forced to give that much!<sup>39</sup> Imitating 2 Corinthians 8:13-15 should actually lead to the adoption of a "graduated tithe"—the more money one makes the *higher* the percentage one gives away. This should never go to such extremes that the rich trade places with the poor; that just alters who is in need of whose help. But, with Ron Sider's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, now in its fifth edition, Christians can commit to begin with a tithe (or whatever is realistic for them, once they have calculated their

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<sup>38</sup> "τιμή is used here in the same double sense as the related verb was in v. 3, i.e., 'honor, reverence,' but more particularly in the sense of 'honorarium' or 'compensation,' as v. 18 makes evident with its reference to wages." George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Carlisle: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 232.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Linda L. Belleville, *2 Corinthians* (Downers Grove and Leicester: IVP, 1996), 220.

essential outlays and made sure they have pared back the inessentials). Then, if and when their income growth in a given year exceeds the level of inflation, they voluntarily increase the percentage that they give. If their income shrinks, or if the economy is in recession, they need not feel obligated to give at quite the same rate.<sup>40</sup> My wife and I adopted this approach when we began married life together in 1979 and, for several years now, have been able to give away above 50% of our annual income. Part of this is because of an unexpected inheritance from my grandfather a number of years back, but a good portion of it has simply to do with our spending priorities and careful budgeting.

### **3. The Objects of Giving**

The three reasons for giving away material possessions throughout the Bible are to support people in ministry, to pay for the upkeep of religious buildings and to help those needier than oneself.<sup>41</sup> The last of these three far outweighs the other two in terms of sheer frequency of emphasis. What individuals are commanded to do with their possessions should form a model for what churches should do with theirs. If churches want their parishioners to give generously to them, they must model giving generously to others. With modest expenditures on facilities, and without hiring too many full-time pastors, it is quite possible even for fairly large congregations to give 20-25% to missions. The graduated tithe can be applied to church budgets just as with personal budgets. Begin with the church's current allotment for ministry outside of its own congregation and increase by

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<sup>40</sup> See esp. Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity*, 5th ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 187-90.

<sup>41</sup> See throughout James D. Quiggle, *Why Christians Should Not Tithe: A History of tithing and a Biblical paradigm for Christian Giving* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 92-156.

approximately a percentage point each year that the church's income grows beyond cost-of-living increases.<sup>42</sup>

Both to help its own membership and to support ministry to outsiders, a church should generously fund the promotion of the holistic gospel message of Scripture. Even though one could write a history of Christianity from the viewpoint of which churches and Christian movements have more stressed evangelism and which have more stressed social justice, and even though it is comparatively rare that the two have been both seen as absolutely crucial, the Bible has no difficulty holding the two together consistently. Many people will never look at Christ or Christianity seriously until they see that we care about the whole person, but simply helping someone's physical or material needs will never usher them into eternity with God unless we explain our spiritual beliefs and commitments.<sup>43</sup>

Where they have any kind of choice at all among Bible-believing churches, Christians should join those whose stewardship priorities come closest to matching biblical priorities. If an individual becomes so disenchanted with the misplaced expenditures of a particular church, and tries to change things from within but receives only rebuff, then that person should look for a different church. The goal should always be to place oneself in the midst of a congregation one can generously support in good conscience. But even the best of churches today often do not come too close to replicating the principles we have discussed in these lectures. So Christians may well have to give above and beyond generous donations to their church to other Christians or

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<sup>42</sup> For exemplary models, see Tom Telford with Lois Shaw, at least in Western contexts, *Today's All-Star Missions Churches: Strategies to Help Your Church Get into the Game* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).

<sup>43</sup> Cf. esp. Ronald J. Sider, *One-Sided Christianity? Uniting the Church to Heal a Lost and Broken World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

Christian organizations that prioritize mission in all its dimensions—evangelism, discipleship and education, helping the poor and fighting systemic injustice in our world.<sup>44</sup>

In some cultures or countries there may be a tax-based welfare system that significantly improves the material lot of the poorest members of society. But rarely is this ever done in conjunction with explicitly Christian witness. So there is almost always still the need for Christians to add their help—both to reach those who fall through the holes in whatever "safety net" the given society has created with social or governmental services as well as to help the culture see the full scope of Christianity. Nor does such private or ecclesiastical involvement with social needs permit us from then refusing to pay our full taxes. If Paul could command the Roman Christians under Nero in about A.D. 57 to pay all their tax and tribute (Ro 13:7),<sup>45</sup> only the worst of today's totalitarian regimes may not deserve at least equal support!

### **III. How Much Is At Stake?**

Central to what it means to be created in God's image is the responsibility of being a good steward of all of God's creation (Ge 1:26-28). One of the distinctive features of humanity that the theory of evolution has yet to come even remotely close to explaining is how we behave as creatures that are accountable to other creatures and even to

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<sup>44</sup> Possibly the best book available for thinking and living as a global Christian in this arena is Jonathan J. Bonk, *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Missionary Problem Revisited*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> For the various factors involved at the time, see esp. Robert Jewett, *Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 798-99. Cf. also Colin G. Kruse, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Nottingham: Apollos; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 490-92.

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God. We may euthanize a violent and dangerous chimpanzee but we would never think of trying it before a jury of its peers, nor could such a trial ever occur because there is no evidence that any other species has the ability to reflect about its behavior, to consider certain things immoral, to conceptualize the existence of God or to imagine holding its fellow animals accountable for their behavior. Doubtless, all of this is bound up with what it means for humans uniquely to be fashioned in the *imago Dei*.

Covetousness or greed for what one does not have and need, especially when it belongs to another, forms the climax of the Ten Commandments, at the very heart of the moral law that carries over into the New Testament (cf. Lk 12:13-15). Yet it is not much of an exaggeration to say that the contemporary advertising industry consistently relies on appealing to the perennial human desire to flagrantly violate the tenth commandment! Material reward or increase *can* be God's response to our faith and obedience, as various proverbs highlight, but the system that *promised* it lasted only while the Mosaic covenant was in force, was limited even then to the nation of Israel, and was an agreement more with the nation as a whole than with each individual.<sup>46</sup> The prophets, on the other hand, regularly rebuked both Israel and the Gentile nations for accumulating wealth at the expense of the poor, of exploiting the needy, of not caring about their suffering, and of remaining fundamentally self-centered. Despite God's longsuffering, inevitably each such cycle of disobedience upon the part of a nation or people group as a whole would lead to God's judgment.

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<sup>46</sup> See further Sondra E. Wheeler, *Wealth as Peril and Obligation: The New Testament on Possessions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 126-27, 133-34.

The heart of New Testament theology resides with the message that Jesus the Messiah comes fulfilling the Old Testament, making forgiveness of sin available once-for-all through his substitutionary sacrifice and bodily resurrection, which is appropriated by grace through faith and not by the works of the Law. But Christianity is no antinomian religion. True, saving faith will of necessity produce good works (Mt 25:31-46; Lk 19:1-10; Gal 5:6; Eph 2:8-10; Php 2:12-13; Jas 2:18-26).<sup>47</sup> High on the list of those good works or "fruit in keeping with repentance" (Mt 3:8 par.) is the stewardship of one's own material possessions, recognizing that they are a gift, or better, a loan from God and that we will have to give a reckoning for how we have managed them. The judgment for the servant who made not even the slightest attempt to invest his master's money was not to assign him to some remote corner in heaven, void of additional rewards; it was hell pure and simple, "outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Mt 25:30)<sup>48</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion

From a fully Christian perspective, material possessions remain good. One day we will have unlimited access to a recreated cosmos with riches beyond our wildest imaginations. The security of that knowledge allows us to sit more loosely toward those possessions

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<sup>47</sup> For comprehensive detail, see Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 546-616.

<sup>48</sup> *Contra*, e.g., Joe L. Wall, *Going for the Gold: Reward and Loss at the Judgment of Believers* (Chicago: Moody, 1991; Fairfax, VA: Xulon, 2005), 116: "Some who were given great talent, wealth, education, or opportunity but thoughtlessly and selfishly squandered those gifts from God will find much of their eternal honor and responsibility eliminated (Matthew 25:14-30)." No, the problem is much worse than this; the inactive servant will not be saved at all.



in this life. In addition, the ways in which money can so quickly become "mammon" or material things turn into materialism warns us against ever accumulating large amounts of surplus without it being earmarked for the Lord's work in the world. What is an inherent good can quickly turn into a seduction to sin. The antidote to this is generous giving, specifically to one's local church but also to a wide variety of Christian individuals or groups who utilize one's gifts for those aspects of kingdom ministry most prioritized in Scripture.

Churches, in turn, should be equally good stewards of the resources they receive. They must pay their pastors generously but not lavishly. They must not spend more on facilities than can be done while still giving to holistic mission via a graduated tithe, the same graduated tithe that individual Christians should practice as well. The material and spiritual well-being of our world is on the line, and, in some instances, a person's own salvation may be at stake. For a profession of faith without the slightest hint of changed spending and giving practices over a lifetime demonstrates that such a profession was vacuous. May God enable each of us to become ever better stewards of what he has loaned to us, for the sake of a lost and needy world.

## ABSTRACT

The consistent biblical antidote to material possessions becoming a seduction to sin is to give them away generously and sacrificially to those who have greater needs. This is not some Communist ideal of exact equality of all individuals but the principle of equity. No one should have too much when some have too little, especially when it is through no fault of their own. A tithe—all of God's people giving exactly ten percent—is nowhere taught in the Bible. Giving was 23 1/3 % annually for ancient Israelites; in the New Testament percentages vary from individual to individual, since one person's generosity is another's stinginess. What is at stake in the discussion about giving may be one's very salvation.

## 撮 要

聖經有關對抗物質擁有誘人犯罪的一致方法，是慷慨解囊，犧牲所有，把自己所有的贈予有更大需要的人。這不等於某些共產主義所提倡的人人完全平等，而是一種公平的原則。「有人有餘，有人卻不足」這情況不應出現，尤其當貧富差距不是基於人為結果。聖經沒有明確教導，上帝的百姓必須剛好奉獻十分一。古代以色列人每年奉獻百分之23 1/3；而在新約，奉獻的多少因人而異，因為某人的樂於奉獻卻是另一人吝嗇的表現。在有關奉獻的討論中，至為重要的可能關乎個人的救恩問題。