

Christian Growth: Biblical Giving

There is a danger of separating out the teaching on giving in the Old and New Testaments. In other words to say that in the Old Testament we have God's people living under Law whereas now we live under grace and are no longer tied to what is required under the old dispensation.

Whilst there is some truth in this, can it become an excuse to sell God short?
We need a biblical perspective on giving.

We don't need to go far into scripture to find the practice of giving to God.
In **Gen 4:4** Abel the shepherd brings an offering to God; the first and best from his flock.
In **Gen 8:20** Noah's first response when coming out of the Ark on dry ground was to bring an offering to God.

Long before Moses was given the Law on Mount Sinai we find the practice of tithing; giving a tenth of what one has back to the Lord.

We see it with Abraham in **Gen 14:20**.

Abraham and the trained men in his household have defeated the four kings who had carried away the possessions and people of Sodom and Gomorrah; including Abraham's nephew Lot **Gen 14:17-23**.

Tithing is then continued by Jacob in Gen 28:22 after his dream at Bethel where God had reinforced promises made to him (**Gen 28:18-22**).

So far we have made reference to four people: Abel, Noah, Abraham and Jacob.

The stories of the four individuals above speak of God's promise to mankind following the Fall; reinforced after the flood and then enshrined in the covenant concerning a great land and nation given by God to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They set the scene for the introduction of the Law of Moses given to this great nation as they set out to possess the promise.

This whole concept of offering becomes an integral part of how the people of God are to live in the land God has given them; and how although required in God's law it becomes a way of life rather than a rigid set of rules.

What we discover in the giving of the Israelites shines an important light on general principles of giving under whatever dispensation, and at the same time explodes some myths about giving that have become a stumbling block for us today.

What were the reasons for Old Testament Giving?

1. In Gratitude for God's goodness

Although Moses was not to enter the Promised Land himself he reminds the people in Deuteronomy 26 what they should do when they get there (**Deut 26:1-3**).

They were to declare how God had brought them from slavery in Egypt; had provided for them on their journey and had kept his promises to them (**Deut 26:9-11**).

They gave the first fruits of the ground to show they were thankful for all the Lord's goodness to them.

"As long as people have experienced the goodness and the salvation of God they have responded with voluntary sacrificial giving" (Peter Maiden).

2. To support for those who served in the House of God

When the tribes of Israel are given their inheritance in the Promised Land the Levites are excluded from this distribution of territory.

Their task is to serve in God's house and commit themselves full time to the spiritual life of the nation.

But how are they to provide for themselves and their families if they are not able to grow food and therefore trade?

Provision is made through the giving of the other tribes (**Deut 18:4-5**).

Giving here is used to support God's work in his house.

How was Old Testament Giving done in practice?

1. The First fruits

In Exodus 23 the major Jewish festivals are set out. Each was a celebration of God's goodness in redemption and provision.

The people were to bring their offerings, but not just any offering (**Ex 23:19a**).

Only the best and first were given to the Lord. It was not a case of giving to God if there was anything left at the end. This remains an important principle today.

2. Tithing

Giving a tenth of what you have was a principle that continued with the Israelites (**Lev 27:30**). We see here that it belonged to the Lord and was set apart for him.

That passage goes on to illustrate tithing in **Lev 27:32-33**. What a lovely picture of the animals passing under the shepherd's rod and every tenth one being given to God.

That way there was no temptation to keep the best ones for yourself so you could get more money for them at market. This was about trusting God and responding to his goodness.

The tithe was used to support the Levites in their work (Num 18:23-24) and also for those in need (Deut 14:28-29).

It was much later under the religious leaders that this beautiful practice of tithing became a burden rather than a joy. Jesus rebukes its misuse in **Matt 23:23**.

3. Freewill offerings

As well as the set offerings to mark certain festivals or events in history; and to continue the work done by the Levites in the house of God, the people also brought freewill offerings.

Examples of this: In the building of the Tabernacle; in **Ex 25:2-80**; In relation to the construction of the temple in Jerusalem in **1 Chron 29:6-9**.

These references give us a real insight into the attitude of Old Testament Giving.

We tend to think it was a burden on the people and that is one of the myths we can explode straight away.

What were the attitudes for Old Testament Giving?

When we read about the offerings of first fruits at festivals it is in an atmosphere of celebration (e.g. Ex 23:14,15,16,16).

With the freewill offerings we are also given an insight into the attitude of the people:

- Giving to the poor was done generously (**Deut 15:7-11**).
- Offerings were to be from the heart rather than from compulsion (**Ex 25:2**).
- Offerings were generously and willingly given (**Ex 35:20-21**).
- Giving to the work of God's house was a privilege (**1 Chron 29:14-17**)

These attitudes were not always evident. They were however a measure of the spiritual health of the people.

A good example of this comes towards the end of the Old Testament story. When the people returned from exile they were in the spiritual doldrums. This is illustrated in the pile of rubble that was once the glorious temple of God and the broken burnt out rubble of the once impregnable walls of the city of God.

Under Ezra and Nehemiah we see the temple and the city rebuilt and then a fresh commitment to the word of God.

This is demonstrated in the commitment of the people of God to care for God's house and not to neglect the offerings (**Neh 10:34-39**).

However, sometime later it transpires that the people are withholding that which belongs to the Lord (**Mal 3:6-9**).

God then proceeds to tell them that if they come back to obedience, they will once more know blessing (**Mal 3:10**).

See the correlation between the two?

New Testament Giving:

What changes between the Old and New Testaments in terms of giving?

Whilst some of the sacrifices were no longer necessary because of Christ's once-and-for-all sacrifice on the cross, what other offerings were no longer valid; albeit it in a different form?

I suggest that the principles remain intact as we go into the New Testament:

- God is still good to his people.
- There are still those in need.
- The work of God's house needs to be continued.
- There are still those whose full time work is the service of the gospel.

Methods of giving in the New Testament reflected the change in economic and social conditions:

- Not everyone lived and worked on the land.
- Many lived in cities and were involved in business and commerce.
- As the church grew there were Christians scattered all over the place.
- The temple was no longer part of the life of most Christians even if they were within reach of it.
- Many Christians met in people's homes; not many workers were paid by the church.

Add to all this the increasing number of Gentiles coming to faith.

There might be an assumption that Jewish Christians would continue the regulations set out in the Old Testament; but what about Gentile believers?

What did NT Christians give?

- Possessions (**Acts 4:32**). They did not consider their possessions their own.
- Food for the needy (**Acts 6:1**).
- Manpower (**Phil 2:25, 29-30**).
- Money (**1 Cor 16:2**). This money was given towards help of the needy (**Acts 11:27-30**) and also to support full time Christian workers (**1 Cor 9:14**).

How did NT Christians give?

To begin with it was spontaneous; such as after Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 2:45). It came from love and gratitude for what God had done for them.

Later it became necessary for giving to be more organised.

In 2 Cor 8-9 Paul urges the Corinthians to get their money ready for the messengers who were collecting it to take to Jerusalem. In 1 Cor 16:2 they were to set aside an amount for the Lord's work each week.

That did not make it legalistic! We see evidence of this in 2 Corinthians 8:

1. The Macedonian church gave as their response to the gospel (**2 Cor 8:2-4**). Paul describes giving in verse 7 as a grace; removing any legalistic aspect of giving.
2. Their generosity started with what they were able to give (a basic principle of giving stated in **2 Cor 8:11-12**). The opposite of this is stated in **2 Cor 9:7**.
3. However, it then went further (**2 Cor 8:3**). They want to give sacrificially.
4. In the same way that we suggested with the people of God in the Old Testament, the health of the church's giving was related to its spiritual health (**2 Cor 8:5**). It was an expression or a sign of the wholehearted commitment they had made to the Lord and to the work Paul was doing.

A question of tithing

Three objections are put forward today for Christians not tithing:

1. We are no longer living under the Law but under grace.

Does that mean that everything God required of his people in the Old Testament no longer applies? What about the Ten Commandments; what about justice and compassion? Indeed, what about helping the needy; what about building God's house; what about being holy? We need to be discerning and also ask ourselves about our motives for consigning certain things to history.

2. The New Testament does not teach tithing.

Or does it? We read earlier of Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees who tithed but neglected actions commensurate with it. Jesus says: *"You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former"*. Jesus does not dismiss it! In the NT letters the closest we get to tithing is 'proportionate giving' (**1 Cor 16:2**). But does that mean we can settle for a lower proportion?

Ignoring tithing is fine if we believe we are giving enough back to the Lord already. If we are giving more than 10% then it is not an issue.

However, if we are giving less than 10% back to the Lord do we honestly feel that this is enough? Note what Paul includes in his teaching on giving in **2 Cor 8:9-11**.

Remember that tithing is just a guide line. But was it ever intended that we should go below it?

3. I cannot afford to tithe

A very timely argument! Economically everyone is beginning to feel the pinch. People are losing their jobs and the future is uncertain.

But just focus on what does not change: God's word and God's promises!

God is no man's debtor and he generously promises that we will not go without if we are faithful in our giving (**2 Cor 9:8**).

There is no end to God's resources (**Phil 4:19**). Those glorious riches do not run dry. We need to trust and obey.

Rather than saying 'I can't afford to tithe', should we not rather be saying 'I can't afford not to tithe'?

May we see biblical giving in a fresh and liberating way! May we live obedient lives and know that promised blessing poured out on our lives and in our church in amounts that we will not have room enough for (Mal 3:10)!