

Matthew 22:15-22: Stewardship/Dedication of Memorial Garden

Genesis 14:17-20

What do Methodists believe about tithing? I heard a Baptist preacher's wife once tell a Sunday School class that Methodists don't believe in tithing, that is why they always talk about stewardship. To set the record straight historically Methodists believe that: "tithing is the minimum goal of giving in the United Methodist Church."(The Book of Discipline, 1992, p. 157) We talk about Stewardship because tithing is just one aspect of a larger issue. What we do with our money is only part of what we do with all the blessings God has given us. But that Baptists sister in Christ did get one thing right: it seems that at least for the last 30 years since I have been in the United Methodist Church we don't talk much about tithing. I know I didn't hear much about it when I was growing up.

At the first church I served I had a member who challenged me on that fact. So I decided that I needed to preach a sermon on tithing at every church I serve. But why should people tithe anyway? Just because the Methodist Church says to? Most Christians know that the Bible commands that a tenth of the produce of the land is the Lord's (Leviticus 27:30), yet they don't do it.

I needed to give people a good reason to tithe. But what could possibly convince people to give one tenth of their money to God? Let's consider the origins of tithing.

The first tithe in the Bible is in *Genesis 14*. And it involved our good friend Mel - you know Mel Chizedek. He was a king but he was also a priest of the Most High God.

The story also involves Abraham, called Abram in this passage. Abraham had just won a military victory. Abraham's nephew Lot

had been taken captive and all his goods stolen by a group of kings. When Abraham heard about it he went and rescued his nephew. With only a little more than 300 men Abraham defeated three kings and rescued Lot and his family.

After this victory King Melchizedek came out to meet Abraham with bread and wine. And Melchizedek blessed Abraham saying, "Blessed be Abraham by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth." And it says that Abraham gave one tenth of everything to God.

So the first tithe was an act of gratitude. Abraham was grateful that God had delivered him from his enemies and had given him the victory. He was thankful that God had blessed him through the king/priest Melchizedek. So in response to God's blessing he gave a tenth of his possessions to God. And that was the first tithe.

So what happened to the tithing concept after that? It didn't come up again until [Genesis 28](#). Jacob, Abraham's grandson, was fleeing for his life from his brother Esau. One night he lay down on the ground and used a stone for a pillow. The fact that he was sleeping out in the open with a stone for a pillow shows the kind of predicament he was in. That night Jacob had a dream.

In the dream he saw angels going up and down a ladder - this is Jacob's ladder that you might have heard of. The dream was a message from God. God was telling Jacob that he was not alone. Even though he had nothing and was fleeing for his life God was with him. And even as he slept God's angels were caring for Jacob.

When Jacob woke up he anointed a stone and named the place "God's house" or in Hebrew "Bet' El" - Bethel. Then Jacob pledged to give one tenth of all he would receive from God. Jacob recognized that he had nothing and that God was blessing him. He

knew that all he would receive would be a gift from God. It was all God's to begin with he was just return part of it to God.

But more important than that was the emotion behind the tithe. For Jacob tithing was an act of worship that spontaneously grew out of thanksgiving. Jacob was thankful for the promise from God that his angels would protect Jacob. Jacob was also thankful for the comfort that this angelic revelation gave him the midst of his loneliness and fear.

Has God blessed you? Have you ever received a word of comfort from God? Have you ever felt an assurance that God was watching over you? Do you have enough food and clothing to care for you and your family? Have you ever received an answer to prayer? Have you ever known a great victory in the battles of your life?

God has blessed you! God has given you the victory over sin and death through Jesus Christ. God has given his only Son to die in your place. God has offered you perfect peace that passeth understanding. God has revealed to you that his angels are ascending and descending a heavenly ladder to take care of you.

What will you do? Abraham gave a tenth of all he had to God. Jacob pledged a tenth of all he would receive. Maybe that is a good reason to give! God has done so much for us so we should give as a response of gratitude and thankfulness.

If you need a reason tithe then here it is. Tithe to give thanks to God for the blessings he has given you! God has given us so much a tenth seems so little to give back, but as a token of gratitude it's a good start!

Yet, is it really about the money, anyway? You see, the Pharisees knew that Jesus had their number. Jesus had been teaching his disciples to beware the leaven of the Pharisees. Their brand of religion was like a cancer that would invade and consume. They were blind guides that led others astray. Instead of serving God they served themselves. Instead of helping the needy they fed off of orphans and widows. And if his teachings were not enough, there was the whole cleansing of the temple thing. Jesus clearly had no respect for their authority!

So the Pharisees decided to attack in self defense. They came to him and pretended to be asking a sincere question of faith. "Should we pay taxes to the Romans?" The question was a legitimate one. After all the Romans were pagans and their government enslaved people all over the world. Should God's people support such a government?

Of course Jesus saw right through their question. It was a trap - a catch 22. No matter what he did they would get him. If he said they should not pay the taxes then they would go to the Romans and have him arrested for treason. If on the other hand he said they should pay taxes they could use that against him. They could say that he did not have enough faith in God, or that he was little more than a tax collector in religious clothing.

Jesus turned the question back on the questioners. "Show me the coin used to pay the tax." It was a Roman coin with the name and image of the emperor on it. So Jesus said, "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's," or "If it has his name on it give it to him." He could have stopped there because he had answered the question. But he went on to say "and render unto God the things that are God's"

That is the point of this passage. Everyone repeat after me: "Render unto God the things that are God's." You see, that is

what the Pharisees were not doing. They were not giving God His due. They were serving themselves and not God.

The question then is "what is due to God?" Now this is supposed to be a "stewardship sermon." So at this point I am supposed to say that God is due one tenth of your income. In other words that you should tithe or regularly give 1/10th of the money you make to the church. That tenth or tithe belongs to God. That is why the bulletin says "God's Tithes and Our Offerings."

When I first decided to preach on this passage that is what I thought I was going to say. I thought "Give unto God the things that are God's," that means "Give God the tithe." Then I got thinking. Did you know that the Pharisees tithed? In fact they were probably the best tithers among God's people. Jesus said that they even tithed mint and dill and cumin. (Matthew 23:23). Does anyone here have an herb garden? The why don't you give a tenth of what you grow in to the church? What about your vegetable gardens? I love fresh corn and tomatoes!

So the Pharisees were really good tithers. And yet Jesus told them they still needed to render unto God the things that are God's. So Jesus was not talking about tithing.

Don't get me wrong. You should tithe, but ultimately this passage is not about something as meaningless as money. Coins and taxes are involved in the story, but in the end Jesus is talking about much more than mere money. If we are to render unto God things that are God's, we would give everything to God. Again I am not talking about money! I am talking about giving our entire lives to God.

Let me illustrate what I mean. Everybody take a deep breath with me: In --- and out. God gave you that breath. If God had not given you that breath you would be turning blue right now.

Every single breath you take is a gift from God. So every breath we take is due to God. We should use every breath to serve God.

How many of you woke up this morning. Assuming I didn't put you to sleep you should all have your hand raised. God gave you this day. So if we render unto God the things that are God's then this day should be dedicated to serving him. And tomorrow, if you wake up, then that day will be a gift from God and it should be dedicated to God.

Jesus says we should render unto God the things that are God's. That means that everything we do should be done for God. Our entire lives should be dedicated to God. Every breath and every waking moment should be rendered unto God. This is not about giving a tenth of your income to God. It is about giving you entire life to God!

You see this is a stewardship sermon after all. Stewardship is ultimately not about money. It is about giving your life to Christ. Ultimately how much you pledge to the church next Sunday or give to the church next year will not change your standing before God. I don't care if everybody in the church pledges to tenth or not. It would be nice though. What would really make me happy is if everyone in this church vowed to render unto God every day and every breath to serve him. And I assume that if we all did give ourselves totally to God, it would have an effect on many things including our offerings.

Christian stewardship is about recognizing that everything we have is from God. And as Christians we are called to seek to use everything we have and everything we are to serve God. That means our time our talents - everything. We will be asking you to turn in an estimate of the money you will give to the church and we will use those figures to construct a budget for next year. But ultimately that doesn't matter - that is just an administrative

necessity. Ultimately what's important is not how much money you give, but who you serve each day.

Jesus said "render unto God the things that are God's." To do that, we have to give ourselves to God. Have you given your life to Christ? Have you asked Jesus to forgive your sins and come into your heart? If you haven't, then forget about pledging or tithing or any of that stuff. That is not important - for you. If you haven't given your life to Christ, then do that today before it is too late. And if you have given your life to Christ, then dedicate everything you have - every moment of every day to His service. That's what Christian Stewardship is all about!
