

# What shall I give?

## ***The Christian and Money***

2 Corinthians 9:1-8

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Did you hear about the lady who took out some lipstick and put it on her forehead? She wanted to “make up” her mind. You’re groaning no louder than I was last Monday when I found that last Sunday’s figures on credit card debt were dated and misleading. I found that the average American household owed \$3400 in the mid-1990s. The newspaper report on Minnesotans owing \$7,000 was 1999, so that wasn’t the same year. I wouldn’t have misled you had personal debt stayed stable. However, Americans have been racing into debt. Although I was unable to find a current figure for Minnesotans; the average American household, according to the state of Minnesota’s official website, now owes around \$8500 to their credit cards! Credit card debt has more than doubled since the mid-90s. These increases are not a result of inflation or recession. They expose a critical need for people to learn to manage both their money and their hearts.

In the Bible God gives us wisdom to manage our money and also our hearts. The Bible progressively reveals God’s will for our lives. Ideas that surface in the Old Testament are further clarified by Christ and his apostles. For example, if we were to package Biblical teaching on managing money into academic courses we might call the Old Testament teaching *Stewardship 101*, Christ’s teaching *Stewardship 201*, and the apostles’ teaching *Stewardship 301*. Some people might be tempted to skip 101 and 201, but they won’t fully understand 301 without the previous teaching. If I were to simplify and summarize biblical teaching on money, I would label the Old Testament: *Economic Partnership*, Christ’s teaching: *Mission Partnership* and the

apostles' teaching: *Spirit-led Partnership*. In regard to our money, the Old Testament asks, "Are you in partnership with God?" Christ asks, "Are you focused on your mission?" The apostles ask, "Are you directed by the Spirit?"

Last week we unwrapped some of the biblical teaching on earning, spending, and saving money; however, a heavy dose of biblical teaching on money is about giving. Paul writes:

***Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:7)***

Most people speed into debt through some kind of compulsion. They are compelled to spend beyond what they have. However, the way of God's Spirit is not compulsion, but freedom. What does the Bible say about giving? It says, "Make up your own mind. It says, "Don't be hesitant or unenthusiastic in what you donate." Who would be honored by such a gift? It says, "Don't let anybody coerce or manipulate you. Don't do it under pressure!" Instead, give what fulfills your heart and brings you joy—for God loves a cheerful giver. This is Spirit-directed giving! Be visionary, enthusiastic, eager, Holy Spirit-inspired, and Holy Spirit-directed. Then you're giving will be fun, and managing your money will be a joy.

Spirit-directed management and giving unfolds in the Old Testament with Abraham. In the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis, he learns that his nephew has been captured along with the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. With 318 trained men from his operation, Abraham pursued the raiding kings and their armies. God gave them a stunning victory. They routed the raiders and regained everyone and everything. In gratitude Abraham took one tenth of all the spoils and gave it to a priest named Melchizedek. God's Spirit filled Abraham's heart so that eagerly, enthusiastically he tithed the spoils. That's Spirit-directed management and giving.

Years later Abraham's grandson, Jacob, was running for his life, and God opened his eyes in a dream to God's activity in the world. Jacob wanted God as a partner and made a life

covenant to return a tenth of the income God would provide. God's Spirit filled Jacob's heart so that the partnership was his desire. Tithing was Spirit-directed management and giving.

Some 400 years later, after Moses led Jacob's descendants to freedom through the Red Sea, God spoke to Moses about being a people in partnership with God. He gave them instruction at Mount Sinai to embrace Jacob's commitment to tithe. Tithing was a way of trusting God. It was accomplished by returning a tenth as you receive it. You gave from the first fruits of your labor, and you trusted God to watch over you and supply your need. God's Spirit directed Moses to make this the standard economic practice for those who worshiped God. It was Spirit-directed management and giving. It was partnership with God. Because it was partnership, they didn't give the tenth, they returned the tenth. Real generosity was seen in what they did with the 90% that God left in their charge. From that money they gave to the poor, made special offerings to the temple, and designated gifts. The tithe was not theirs to designate. It belonged to God and was simply returned as God had directed them in the law.

Unfortunately, many did not have the heart or faith to live in this partnership. They would give some, but not the full tithe. They trusted their own ingenuity, management skills and the promises of others, like we trust our banks, brokers, insurance companies and government. They shaved the tenth down to whatever they thought acceptable. They grabbed a sick or injured lamb, or whatever was leftover to sacrifice. They still gave, but not eagerly or enthusiastically. They lacked the trust and love to give generously. They resented the command to tithe.

Malachi confronted them. He said:

***“Ever since the days of your ancestors, you have scorned my laws and failed to obey them. Now return to me, and I will return to you,” says the LORD Almighty. “But you ask, ‘How can we return when we have never gone away?’ Should people cheat God? Yet you have cheated me! But you ask, ‘What do you mean? When did we ever cheat you?’ You have cheated me of the tithes and offerings due to me. You are under a curse, for your whole nation has been***

***cheating me. Bring all the tithes into the storehouse so there will be enough food in my Temple. If you do ...I will open the windows of heaven for you. I will pour out a blessing so great you won't have enough room to take it in! Try it! Let me prove it to you! Your crops will be abundant, for I will guard them from insects and disease. Your grapes will not shrivel before they are ripe... Then all nations will call you blessed, for your land will be such a delight," says the LORD Almighty. (Malachi 3:7-12, NLT)***

Did you hear the charge of cheating? You don't cheat somebody with your money. You cheat them with theirs. In this case, they cheated their partner God. God was no more willing to bless them than a parent is a naughty child. What good mother would tell her daughter, "*You stole my watch? Good job, here's a necklace that matches!*" What good father would say to his son, "*You forged a check? Clever! Here's some saving withdrawal slips!*" In the same way, God spoke through the lips of Malachi and said that he was waiting for a chance to bless. Those windows of heaven had become flood gates holding back blessing that God desires to give. God's saying, "*I have this reservoir of blessing and the pressure is growing. When will you fulfill your side of the partnership, so I can fulfill mine? I can hardly wait!*"

The Bible teaches that one day God would give his people the heart to live in partnership. They would have a new spirit, the Holy Spirit. The passion within them would overcome the fear. The passion within them would help them act in faith. That passion would make tithing an opportunity rather than a burden. It would make it a promise to be celebrated rather than a burden to be avoided. God's redeeming work would become so precious to them. Saving people, reclaiming a lost and hurting world, bridging the gap between people and their creator would fill their heart and dominate their vision. The tithe would be only a start in their exciting journey with God.

Years ago, a young man in my church had so badly mismanaged his finances that he was nearing bankruptcy. He had made a mess of his marriage and his life. In a drunken fit he had

attempted suicide and failed. After all of that he knelt at the communion railing, and said, “Jesus, forgive me and please take over.” He felt such peace, but his finances still looked hopeless. He had heard about tithing, and he figured that the way he was going down hill there wasn’t much to loose. So he started to tithe. At first he borrowed more, but things began to change and within a year he was out of debt. A few years later his tithe amounted to 20% of our church’s budget. God’s Spirit gave him such compassion and joy that he gave way beyond a tithe to see God’s kingdom advanced. I remember the day he told me that he was selling his house and giving away the entire amount. He was so tickled to see the years of hard work that his investment in his house represented be used to change lives. He felt such freedom. He felt no compulsion, just a freedom and joy.

You can’t even begin to identify with my friend until you settle the issue in your heart that God is responsible for your wealth and health and you feel the love God has for you.

Tithing is not a magic formula to wealth. Abraham was forced to move to Egypt because of drought, and later Jacob was forced to do the same. J. C. Penney tithed and still went bankrupt twice. We are not talking magic. We are talking partnership. Abraham, Jacob and J.C. Penney found God faithful in hard times and eventually were blessed beyond their dreams.

How can your money management be Spirit-directed? The key is this: Is God your partner? *Do you trust God and use money, or do you trust money and use God?* Which is true of you? In the Scriptures God has given us principles for earning, spending and saving money. Applying them makes an enormous difference; however, the key principle is whether you actually are God’s partner and whether the Spirit that directed Jesus is directing you. Is the pulse of your heart to set people free? Are you driven by the love and vision that Jesus had to forgive and free people from destruction? Are you your Father’s partner?