



A Passion for Giving

(1 Cor 9:6-15, Malachi 3:7-12)

We looked last week at the way in which a new year brings forth challenges for us. We had the challenge of crossing the Jordan and entering the promised land and then last Sunday evening we saw that we have a God who wants to restore us to the glory of former times. In order to advance into new territory, we need to realise that we need to follow in the way that God has called us. Joshua was given the command to obey God's law and not deviate from it to the right or to the left. We have a duty to honour God and to listen to His voice. Over this week and next week, I want to look at two aspects of honouring God that I believe are major issues for this church as we enter 2005.

They are important because I believe that irrespective of how God may have gifted us, these two aspects of our faith are something we can all be involved with because God has made it that way.

The one I want to look at this week is "A Passion for Giving". There is a sense in which we have already seen the blessings that God gives us when we show generosity. It seems that when we pay the final bill for the building works, every penny of the cost of the ceiling repairs will have been covered. God honours those who honour Him. Our desire is to have a facility here that we can use for His glory. January 30th is not the end of a journey, but the start of one. It has been a down-payment and God's work must reach fruition through it.

I am conscious as well, that we have reaped perhaps more than we have sown. Whereas it's true that many prayers have been made for the worship of God in this place over the years and that many of you have given generously to it, we know that God has given us much more back than we ever put in. But that's the nature of God isn't it? He's someone who opens the floodgates of heaven as I keep being reminded by many of you. We honour Him in a little but He is gracious to us in much.

Why do I say all this? Because we are at the start of a new era. In the old era we have been occupied in dealing with the difficulties that this building poses. But we don't serve a building. It serves us. We have a responsibility to be good stewards of what God has given us and in repairing this building we have done that.

In this new era we have a responsibility to build the church – the body of people. And at the outset of this era, as we reflect on the fact that God has been generous to us, we need to examine what He desires of us as we now attend to the building that really matters – His church. Last week that following was on the basis of obedience – do not deviate from my law to the right or to the left. God blesses richly – but His people have a responsibility to honour Him too.

You've probably heard a lot from various people about tithes and offerings over the years. I've heard plenty of people even here say "Well that's your opinion, but mine is..." The only opinion that matters is not yours or mine, but God's. This morning we are going to have a look at what scripture says on this subject and we already have had read the two key passages read to us this morning. There is a lot of junk written and believed out there for what are very simple principles and the Word of God is pretty straightforward on this subject. I don't have time to look at these in a lot of detail this morning. Maybe we'll have a Bible study on these soon so we can explore what God says through His word more closely.

● Tithes and offering – what's the difference?

Tithes were instituted as part of the Law, the Torah. Basically a tenth (tithe) of all God had given them as the produce of their land had to be presented back to Him. It was a means of recognising God's continuing provision and grace towards them. The tithe was used in a number of ways, but primarily to support those who had been appointed to serve as ministers to them – the Levites but the tithe was also used to support the Temple and to community worship, particularly meals and feasts. In

other words it was a response to God' s grace and used to support those who were consecrated to His work and the physical structure of religion. After the Exile, the Jews who were scattered a long distance from home used the tithe to support rabbis and synagogues. Although a formal tithe is not replicated in the NT, it is clear that the early churches took material responsibility for ministers of the gospel – although some like Paul opted not to be supported in that way. More on that in a minute. In short we can say that tithing is giving that supports the the ongoing worship of God and those who are recognised as ministers of it and it is a *responsibility* that God has given to His people.

Offerings were also presented in the OT and these were *in addition* to the tithe. Offerings had two purposes. Firstly there were straight offerings to God. They were not put into storehouses or anything like that. They were presented to God on the altar for His glory. The second form of offering were alms – items given to the poor. In fact, throughout scripture we find generous giving to the poor was *commanded* because we have a God who has compassion on the poor.

● What constituted tithes and offerings?

The OT law broadly stipulated in the tithe that there should be a tenth of what people produced or received. It was the primary financial responsibility of the people of God to Him. To not give dishonoured God. Let me remind you of the words in Malachi 3 *"Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' "In tithes and offerings. 9 You are under a curse--the whole nation of you--because you are robbing me.* That included offerings too which were always on top of the tithe.

Temple taxes and tithes varied over the years, but the tithe was there to support the worship and the formal work of God in the temple and that invariably was people and buildings. The tithe could be things or money and put in the temple treasury. The first-born and the best for God was always stipulated, not the bad animals or cast-offs. By the time of the NT it was money given into the temple treasury as many people lived in towns and were involved in trade and business.

But there is another thread to offerings which is also clearly taught in Scripture. It' s not just things but ourselves. God desires us, not merely our things. So we find Romans *12:1 Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship.* Offerings are not just the giving of things, but making all one is and all one has available to God. That' s the offering I believe God values most – lives consecrated to Him. *Take my life and let it be, consecrated Lord, to Thee.*

● What about us?

First of all we are not under law but under grace, so some may argue that we are under no obligation to give anything at all. But is that true? The law is only a reflection of the nature of God. What' s He like? He is a God who is prepared to give graciously withhold nothing and gave up the most precious thing He had – His Son – for our redemption. We love because He first loved us. We obey Him because we honour His grace. We give because God first gave to us! As we take on the responsibility of being the people of God, we take on the responsibility of giving as God gave just as we love as God loved us. *2 Cor 9:15 Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!*

● So how did early church give?

This stands as our guide and principles by which we give as the church of God.

Principle 1: Support your full time workers

Principle 2: Care for the Poor

Principle 3: Give Generously as to the Lord

Principle 4: Generosity is a witness

Principle 5: Claim the Promises of God

➡ Principle 1: Support your full time workers

The early church gave to support their full time-workers (ministers, apostles) in the same way the Jews did to their rabbis and Levites. This is a principle that has held 2000 years. Let' s look at some verses from 1 Cor 9:1 *Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? 2 Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. 3 This is my defence to those who sit in*

judgement on me. 4 Don' t we have the right to food and drink? 5 Don' t we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord' s brothers and Cephas ? 6 Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living? 7 Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk? 8 Do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn' t the Law say the same thing? 9 For it is written in the Law of Moses: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Is it about oxen that God is concerned? 10 Surely he says this for us, doesn' t he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the ploughman ploughs and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. 11 If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? 12 If others have this right of support from you, shouldn' t we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ. 13 Don' t you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? 14 In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel. 15 But I have not used any of these rights.

Paul accepted he was not the norm. He didn' t accept support from other believers because God had called him to a "tent-making" ministry. He supported himself by working. However, he clearly espoused the principle that God' s people must take responsibility for the welfare of their full time workers even if he chose not to benefit from it himself. The word "tithing" may have disappeared as law, but the obligation to support the worship of God and its ministers still remains. Its a responsibility we took on when we decided to become part of God' s family. At a church level, those of us who believe that this is our church fellowship, have a responsibility to ensure that the expenses of the work of God are met here – and that includes paying the minister as well as funding all the other aspects of the church' s work. That is tithing by any other name and what tithing is about and the primary responsibility of being part of the church of God.

What about us? The tithe is our challenge for 2005 here in Swaffham. In 2002 you took on the responsibility of appointing a Minister. Some people believe that Ministers are paid out of some central fund or even by the Government. That' s not so. The material care of the minister is entirely the responsibility of the local Church as is the upkeep of all aspects of the ministry, including the buildings. It' s true that we do receive a grant from Home Mission to support the minister but more on that later.

Ever since I was appointed to the ministry here, the General Fund out of which the church meets its responsibilities to the minister has run in deficit. The deficit was met out of reserves. Unfortunately, there is only about 12 months of reserve left at the present rate of giving to the General Fund. And just when you thought the picture was looking rosy! As you should have just realised, as a church we have a scriptural responsibility to support its minister and its ministry. And now we have come to a situation where we must seriously meet that responsibility. Just as we showed our commitment to the work of God in the building project, we must now show the same faithfulness as we attend to the spiritual building.

You may be thinking "why can' t the Minister accept less? As Paul reminds us in the passage I just read *Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk?*

We don' t only have a scriptural obligation, but we have a legal obligation too. When I was appointed, the church agreed to a grant from Home Mission Fund. In 2006 it will be over £13,000 which is the highest given to any church in the UK. It is a discretionary grant and not guaranteed in the future. Receiving it is under the condition that the church agrees to pay the rest of its obligation to the minister. If the church fails to do this, then the grant will be withdrawn.

The simple practicality is that unless things change, the church will not have a minister by 2006. That is our challenge of 2005 and beyond. We' ve met one challenge, we now have another one to meet. I believe, like you that I have been called here and that God will provide, but each have a God-given responsibility to bring our tithes and offerings before God.

But there is some good news. First of all, the net giving just by people from this church to the Fabric Fund last year was by my guess, around £5,000 last year. We received many larger gifts to the Fabric Fund from outside as one-offs. That £5,000 almost equals our General Fund deficit. Secondly, the church is growing. If you are new to the church and you feel God is calling you to be a part of this church, then you inherit the responsibility to support the ministry here.

We may have a £5,000 deficit, but that is only £2 extra into the offertory per week per regular attender which was already going into the Fabric Fund anyway.

Principle 2: Care for the Poor

They made regular collections to benefit the poor. Not only did churches meet their obligations to full-time workers, but they gave generously to the poor. We read three times of how churches supported the poor and famine relief in Judea. They held collections on the first day of the week regularly for them.

1 Cor 16:1 Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. 2 On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.

Why do you think we take collections on Sunday? As with OT practice, the churches gave to the poor above their obligation to their own full-time workers and the costs of their local ministry, not as an alternative to it. That should be our pattern too and is consistent with the teaching of scripture. This is an opportune time to reflect on this as we look at the enormous need there is to help those poor countries that have been hit by the tsunamis in the Indian Ocean. The start of 2005 not only provides us to reflect on the nature of regular giving for God's work, but our regular giving to the poor – those who God loves especially.

These words from 1 Corinthians also underline another principle – that of regular giving. *Each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up.* If they had left it until Paul came then all he would have got was what was “in the hat”. But regular giving ensured that the purposes of God were better served because a little each week became a lot so when the needs arose, they could respond to them.

Principle 3: Give Generously as to the Lord

God calls on us to give generously. We are not under law about the tenth, so how much should we give?

 a tenth is a good guide but that's all it is. Some people would fuss about the tenth and say “Is that gross or net income?” If that's you then you've missed the point here. This is the teaching of the NT: *7 Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.* The NT does not stipulate a tenth? Why. So we are not just obliged to give a tenth. The Pharisees faithfully gave a tenth as their tithe. To the exact denarius. What was Jesus' attitude to that? *Mark 12:41 Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. 42 But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. 43 Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. 44 They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything--all she had to live on."* The poor woman didn't give a tithe – she gave everything she had. One observation I have made out of living on this earth a little while is that some of the most generous givers I have ever met have been some of the poorest people financially I have ever met. Yet they are rich in ways you couldn't even imagine.

 giving should be a matter of the heart. God gave His Son generously and provides for us still. What does our heart tell us about how we should give. What is God prompting from your heart this morning? Do you know? Are you giving what God wants or what *you* have decided according to *your* needs. What is your responsibility before God? Have you gone before Him about it? Is the money you give in accordance with His will, or do you give according to how you feel at the time? For some people it's a tenth – but maybe you can afford more. Maybe you can't give much. As we'll see soon, giving comes with a promise. Bear in mind these verses: *2 Cor 9: 6 Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. 7 Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.* God loves a hilarious giver. Giving is fun. It should bring joy and pleasure. Giving should be fun! How different this is to

the values of our society where what I have is MINE and I will enjoy it!

- giving does not just mean money – it means our possessions and ourselves. It is the forgotten aspect of tithes and offerings. Everything we have is given by God. As modern westerners we like money. But God has given us homes and possessions. God doesn't require us to just consider our cash. What about all the other things? Can't they be used for His glory? What about our time? It's not just about money. Our presence can be as important as our cash. That help you gave someone by giving them a lift may be more important to somebody than the pound you put in a charity box. We've been given to give.
- Jesus wasn't worried about maths. When people asked Him what they had to do to follow Him, He just said, sell all that you have and follow me. What is Jesus calling you to give this morning. How is He asking you to use what He has given you. Are you listening? How are you going to respond to Him?

➔ Principle 4: Generosity is a witness

2 Cor 9:12 This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. 13 Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. 14 And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you.

How individuals and a church behave, even if it is unto the Lord is so often still a public thing. People see how we treat our ministers, they see how we help the poor, they see how we involve ourselves with the community. Our generosity reflected what we think of our God. As we confess Christ, our actions should match our words.

➔ Principle 5: Claim the Promises of God

I'm sure some of you will have listened to this and be saying to yourselves "It's all very well for him, but I can't afford to give any more. I can't afford to give people hospitality. I can't afford to do this or do that". Can't or won't? Let me finish by emphasising what God Himself emphasises about giving.

Giving brings a promise. As we give, God is generous in greater measure: *Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.* There. It's not often that God makes a challenge and a promise like this. Try me out. See if it isn't true. God loves a generous giver. The principle is the same in the NT: *10 Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. 11 You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.* To some, this is the basis of "prosperity ministry". Give a lot and God will make you rich. Look carefully because it doesn't quite say that. God will bless us so that we can bless others even more. Rich towards God is not about wealth and finance (although it could be), but rich in the things of God – things we can pass on and bless other people with. So people who think they can give to God and expect lots of cash back in order to bolster their personal wealth will be sorely disappointed. As I said earlier, I've been humbled by support I've received from people who are less well off than I have who I know give sacrificially – but I'll tell you this, they are rich in their relationship with God.

But we have a promise *Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.* Plenty of you quote it to me. But it's a conditional promise. You pay your dues; you honour your responsibility and I'll open the floodgates of heaven. God provides, yes, but He expects us to honour Him in the simple things of life – like in the giving of tithes and offerings.

So why don't you try it? Why don't we try it? We have already done so to an extent in the building. But if we want to see His blessing in the future, then we have to be prepared to take the risks and to put our faith into actions in the way we support the work of God here. And we have a God who says "try me". We've seen some of the flood coming from heaven, but there's plenty more where that came from. Let's honour God in the way we give as individuals as a Church and see Him honour His

work here as He opens the floodgates of heaven

● **You' re on your honour.**

Maybe you' ve been left thinking this morning about your own financial commitment before God. You' ve certainly been left with plenty to think about. Then let' s underline that final principle this morning. Giving comes with a promise. We have seen that we have a responsibility to support the work of God, a responsibility to help the poor, a responsibility to be generous in all our actions.

But who are we responsible to? Well, it isn' t to me! In the end, your giving is secret and of your own free will. No-one checks up on you. It can be an offering as anonymous as you want it. Our responsibility is to God both as individuals and a church. If we don' t give of what He asks of us, then we don' t rob the Minister, or the Church, or the poor: we rob God Himself!

These are serious and challenging matters. We have a responsibility to heed the words of scripture and respond to a God who desires to open the floodgates of heaven to us.

8 "Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask, `How do we rob you?' "In tithes and offerings. 9 You are under a curse--the whole nation of you--because you are robbing me. 10 Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.



*Preached by Mark Reid
Swaffham Baptist Church
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