

STEWARDSHIP

What is stewardship?

The whole world and everything in it belong to God (Psalm 24:1). This includes you and me and everything we possess. Our money and our time, our homes and our families, our bodies and our souls – all were created by God and rightfully belong to Him.

God has entrusted these things to us to use and manage. They are only in our possession temporarily, and pass out of our hands at death. But as long as we live, we are God's stewards, the servants He has put in charge of His property. We are responsible to manage what God has given us wisely and for His glory (Luke 19:13).

What does this mean? It means handling all our resources and possessions in the knowledge that we shall one day give an account of our stewardship (Matthew 18:23). This applies to everything we have. As stewards of our time, we are to use it productively and not waste it. As stewards of our bodies, we are to keep them healthy and not abuse them. As stewards of the earth, we are to take care of the environment and not despoil our natural resources.

The concept of stewardship applies with special force to our finances. The Bible has a great deal to say about the use of money and proper attitudes toward it. Knowing we must give an account to God for the way we handle our resources, we are careful to be honest in all our financial dealings. We avoid waste and extravagance. And we try to be generous in sharing with those who have less. We want God to be pleased with the way we earn and use our money.

Are Christians supposed to be rich, or poor?

Some people believe that God blesses those who are most deserving, or who have the most faith. In their thinking, wealth is a sign of godliness. Others think that wealth is a sign of

selfishness, and that truly godly people will shun riches and embrace poverty. Both ways of thinking are mistaken. There is no virtue in either wealth or poverty. What really matters is not how much money we have, but how we acquired it and what we do with it.

Wealth often comes as a result of hard work and thrift, while poverty often follows laziness or wasteful spending (Proverbs 10:4). But such is not always the case in this fallen world. Wealth can be obtained through exploitation or dishonesty, and poverty may result from misfortune or injustice. In many societies, wealth and poverty depend primarily on which family a person is born into, and there is very little movement from one socio-economic class to another. In short, it is a mistake to try to judge a person's moral or spiritual condition by his bank account.

Whether little or much, all that we possess comes from God (James 1:17), and we should be thankful for what we have (1 Timothy 6:8). Those who have an abundance should be grateful for God's blessing. But with greater wealth comes greater responsibility (Luke 12:48). The more we have, the more we must give account for.

Both wealth and poverty bring temptations that test us in different ways (Proverbs 30:8, 9). The poor are tempted to envy the rich, and to complain against God. The wealthy are tempted to accumulate possessions for self-centered purposes (Luke 12:20-21), and to trust in their riches instead of God (1 Timothy 6:17). Of the two, wealth appears to be the more dangerous to our souls (Matthew 19:24; 1 Timothy 6:9). Jesus recognized its power over us, and warned us severely against allowing it to steal our loyalty and affection away from God (Matthew 6:24).

Perhaps the poor are more likely to recognize their dependence upon God, and to thank Him for their daily bread. On the other hand, those who are wealthy have great opportunity to be channels through which God can bless others. They have the privilege of sharing with those in need, and to use their wealth to advance the Kingdom of God (1 Timothy 6:18, 19).

What is tithing?

Tithing is the practice of giving ten percent of our income back to God. The tithe is first mentioned in Scripture with Abraham, then later with Jacob. These patriarchs of the faith offered a tithe of what they received in acknowledgement that it was God who had blessed them, and as a token of gratitude to Him (Genesis 14:18-20; 28:20-22).

When Moses presented the laws of God to the people of Israel, tithing was established as a mandatory practice (Leviticus 27:30). God claimed for Himself a tenth of the produce of every field and flock, and commanded the Israelites to return it unto Him. To fail to give God the tithe that was due Him was considered stealing from God (Malachi 3:8, 9).

Should we practice tithing today?

Although we are no longer bound by the Mosaic law which commands tithing, there is nevertheless abundant reason for us to continue the practice:

1) Our reason for tithing is the same as that of Abraham and the nation of Israel: to acknowledge that all we have has come from God's hand. By returning to Him our tithe, we express both our gratitude for what we have received and our faith that God will continue to supply our needs.

2) Jesus approved of tithing. Though He criticized the Pharisees for many things, He commended their practice of tithing, even in little things (Luke 11:42).

3) Tithing brings blessing. God's promise to bless those who tithe is still in effect (Malachi 3:10).

4) Having received so much more under the New Covenant (Hebrews 8:6), how can we give less than they gave under the Old?

Where should we give our tithe?

It is neither necessary nor possible to give the tithe directly to God, so it is given to His representatives, to those who minister in His name. In the Old Testament, the tithe was brought to the temple – the place of worship – and shared with the priests and Levites who carried on the work of the temple. In the same way, today we bring our tithe to the local church where we worship.

There are many godly and effective para-church organizations that are worthy of support. But our first obligation is to the local church to which we belong. God instructs us to give financial support to those who give us spiritual nourishment (1 Corinthians 9:13, 14). The tithe should be given to support the pastor and ministries of the local church.

The local church is made up of individuals who are committed to Christ and to one another. An important part of this commitment is financial. The local church depends on its members for support; it has no other source of revenue. We cannot claim to be truly a part of the church if we are withholding from it our financial resources.

What about other offerings?

The tithe should be seen as a minimum. Of course, we cannot give what we do not have, but most Christians in affluent nations can and should give more. Our giving should be in proportion to what the Lord has given us, and a reflection of the gratitude we feel in our hearts (2 Corinthians 8:12). Our offerings should be seen as tokens of our love to God.

The offerings we give over and above the tithe may be given wherever we please, though we ought to make sure they are used wisely and for worthy causes. The local church will often have special needs or projects, and we will likely find other ministries as well to which we will want to contribute. The Scripture mentions two areas of ministry in particular to which every Christian (and church) ought to give:

- **Missions** – Christ commissioned His church to take His Word into every nation (Matthew 28:19), and those who do not go have an obligation to support those who do (Romans 10:14, 15). The task of world missions is the responsibility of every Christian. And what better use for our money than in spreading the gospel?
- **The Poor** – Time and again the Bible admonishes those who have to share with those who have not (Leviticus 19:10; 1 John 3:17). Indeed, God promises to repay those who give to the poor (Proverbs 19:17), for He views what we give to the poor as gifts unto Him (Matthew 25:40). We must never forget our responsibility to the poor, for it is only by God's grace that we do not find ourselves among them.

We should not settle for giving only what we can spare. If our giving is no sacrifice, then it is worth little (2 Samuel 24:24). Yet we will never really suffer for what we give, for the more we give, the more we will receive (Luke 6:38).

We should not view giving as a burden or duty, but as an opportunity. We are blessed to be able to invest our money in the building of God's Kingdom, and to reap eternal rewards from what we give in this life (Matthew 6:19-21).

Are our motives for giving important?

More important in God's sight than how much we give is *why* we give. God is interested in the attitude with which we give, and He looks at what is in the heart as well as what is in the offering plate.

Jesus emphasized that our giving should never be done to impress others, and recommended anonymous giving for this reason (Matthew 6:2-4). Neither should we give grudgingly or reluctantly, but only because we really want to (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Giving should come naturally to us as Christians, because we have received so much (Matthew 10:8). God's people are generous, because God is generous.

God wants us to give cheerfully, joyfully, out of an overflowing heart. We give out of love: love for God, love for our fellow believers, love for those in need, love for the lost, love for the Kingdom of God. God demonstrated His love by giving His best to us (John 3:16). In the same way, giving is a great way to demonstrate *our* love as well.

Just as the ancient Hebrews brought gifts to the temple to worship God, the offerings we present should be an integral part of our worship. Indeed, we should never forget: giving *is* worship.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Read Luke 12:13-34.

1. Does the quality of our life depend upon how much we possess (verses 15, 23)? Why or why not?
2. In the parable, why did God call the rich man a fool?
3. Do you think God can be trusted to supply your material needs?
4. Which is more secure, treasure on earth or treasure in heaven?
5. How can we acquire treasure in heaven?