

Living at the intersection of
Faith & Finances



***What do hands and feet have
to do with giving? Read on
and you will see***

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**The world's view of Christianity,
then and now**

“All the believers ... sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need ... They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.” Acts 2: 44-47

*“He believed in Communism the way most people believed in God; he would not be greatly surprised or disappointed if he turned out to be wrong, and meanwhile it made little difference to the way he lived.”
Ken Follett, in Triple, 1979.*

Not many of us will write words so wise and powerful that people will want to read them 300 years later. But in 1729, the Reverend William Law, an Anglican priest, sat down and penned a classic book that Christ followers still find inspiring and challenging. The title is: *A Serious Call To A Devout And Holy Life*.

Rev. Law cuts right to the heart of the matter when it comes to living for Christ with statements like this: “If you stop and ask yourself why you are not as pious as the primitive Christians, your heart will tell you that it is neither through ignorance nor inability, but purely because you never thoroughly intended it.”

Ouch! That’s a painful assessment, but one I’m hard pressed to refute. When I find myself falling behind in pursuit of Christ it is easier to tell myself, “He walks too fast,” than admit the truth that I’m dragging my feet.

Law’s genius isn’t in developing new theology; it’s in his ability to teach old truths in memorable ways, even if the lessons are sometimes difficult to absorb. When he writes about giving, for instance, he provides a word picture that is now forever planted in my mind:

“If a man had eyes, hands, and feet that he could give to those who had none; if he should either lock them up in a chest, or please himself with some needless or ridiculous use of them, instead of giving them to his brethren who were blind and lame, should we not justly reckon him an inhuman wretch?

“Money has very much the nature of eyes and feet; if we lock it up in chests, or waste it in needless expenses upon ourselves while the distressed want it for their necessary uses we are not far from the cruelty of him that chooses rather to adorn his house with hands and eyes, than to give them to those that want them.”

Seriously? My money as hands, feet and eyes that are locked in a chest so that the lame and blind can’t use them? That imagery really messes with my preferred mental image of owning a large garage filled with Italian supercars, plus a Cobra or two. And maybe a GT40.

Is the Rev. Law just being an old-fashioned geezer or is he telling us a truth we need to hear; one we need to think about, talk about, and pray about? As much as I dislike falling into the buzz kill camp, Law wasn't channeling the world's oldest bouffant-haired televangelist, he was channeling Jesus.

What did Jesus say?

When it came to teaching his followers about life, Jesus did not lay down a long list of do's and don'ts for right living. Instead, he distilled his commands into just two: Love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:29-30). As Christ followers, everything we do should flow from these two commands.

Living with principles instead of hard and fast rules is difficult. It requires more than rote responses. Wouldn't it be easier to know how much we "had" to give; that we could chip in a tithe and be done with it? (A tithe being 10%). Many preachers, in fact, teach that a tithe is a New Testament imperative. I respectfully disagree. I believe while Jesus and his Apostles taught Christ followers to give generously, none set a specific limit.

Years ago a missionary spoke during our Sunday morning service. After church was over I walked out behind a woman who was telling a friend: "I didn't give a penny when they passed the plate for that man; I've already given my tithe for the year."

This is exactly the attitude Jesus saw exhibited by the Scribes and Pharisees, who he often used as examples of how not to behave. The First Century religious leaders, like the woman at church, ran up to the limit of the Law (a tithe) and stopped. The clearly defined tithe allowed them to check a requirement off their list and feel good about themselves. They were shocked and angered to hear Jesus say their form of giving was unacceptable to God, because their giving was not motivated by love or mercy.

Luke 18: 10-14 chronicles one such confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders: "*Two men went up to the temple to*

pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself; ‘God, I thank you that I am not like all other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The Pharisees thought of themselves as the good guys who did everything right. The tax collector knew he was a sinner, despised by society. Here Jesus flips their roles to illustrate that heart condition –motivation -- is more important than rules keeping. The man who recognizes his sins and pleads for forgiveness is put right with God. The man who keeps the Law yet has an unloving heart is lost in sin and doesn't even know it.

The first principle for giving, then, is to do so out of genuine love for God and for the people who are in need of help. Giving out of obligation or anything other than love is not pleasing to God.

Giving redefined?

Even before Jesus began to teach, John the Baptist spoke about the type of giving that pleases God. In Luke 3:11 he tells a crowd: “The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

This was not a comforting thought to his listeners. Understanding John was speaking about them and concerned for their personal safety, they asked: “What should we do then?”

John's response was not what they were expecting. He didn't say to love God. He didn't say to follow the Messiah. He didn't say to go give a special gift to the Temple. What he said was this: “*The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.*” John's words seem so simple, yet they are so difficult to do. To produce good fruit, the people

were to share with one another, so that those with too much (more than they needed) gave to those with too little. The end result would be that no one went without while others lived with plenty.

The first Christians were Jewish and subject to the Law that required tithing. Some time after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, however, they switched from meeting in synagogues to gathering in homes. What did Jewish Christians do with their tithes? As new Christians, they had no priests or religious organizations to support. Did they continue to tithe to the synagogue? We're not told, but it appears unlikely.

Here's what we find in Acts 2:44-45: *"All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need."*

Acts 4:32-35 reports what happened after the Holy Spirit came upon the believers in Jerusalem: *"And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own; but all things were common property to them. And with great power the apostles were giving witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales, and lay them at the apostles' feet; and they would be distributed to each, as any had need."*

Wow! They actually did what John the Baptist told the crowd to do in Luke 3:11. They shared with one another so the needs of all were met.

I think it's important to note that Acts 2 and 4 are about the believers in Jerusalem. As Christianity spread, not all Christians everywhere sold all they had, not even in the first years of Christianity. That we know from Scripture and historical accounts.

What's described in Jerusalem is not necessarily a prescription for what must happen, but it is a description of what actually occurred. Giving everything away may not have been a requirement, but when they did these new believers had a stunning effect on the surrounding community, as we see in Acts 2:47:

“...And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” And in Acts 4:34: “...there was not a needy person among them.” The lesson for us is in seeing what happens when believers sow plentifully rather than sparingly.

There can be no question that sharing our finances is a New Testament value. It’s when we get into the area of how much to give and to whom that we find the most disagreement.

Keep in mind that John the Baptist, Jesus, and the Apostles give us principles that require us to make judgments. An example is found in Matthew 6:1-4, where Jesus says: “*So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*”

What a great word picture Jesus paints! When you give to the needy, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Note that Jesus says “**when**” you give to the needy. Then he says it again to emphasize this important point. He is telling us he expects us to give, but not in ways that embarrass the recipients or in ways designed to draw attention to ourselves.

Once again, Jesus sets no minimums or maximums for giving. That, I believe, is because true love dictates that our sharing be guided by the size of the need and our ability to respond.

The person who has plenty gives out of that plenty. The person who has little adjusts his or her sharing accordingly. However much we share, Jesus’ expectation is that our giving, motivated by the magnitude of his gift to us, will occur naturally when opportunities are presented.

Macedonians model how to share

Like Jesus, Paul teaches that giving money to those in need is an essential part of loving our neighbors. Here’s what he wrote in II Corinthians 8: “*And now, brothers, we want you to know about*

the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints... see that you also excel in this grace of giving. I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.

“... Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality, as it is written: ‘He that gathered much did not have too much, and he that gathered little did not have too little.’”

Paul writes about the grace bestowed on the church in Macedonia. Though they were poor, they gave “liberally.” What a marvelous picture of a giving, loving group of people! He uses the Macedonian Christians as an example for the Corinthians. First the Macedonians gave themselves to the Lord, then they gave of their resources, according to what was needed. Shouldn’t the Macedonian generosity also be an example for us?

Paul says his desire is not that the Corinthians follow suit by giving so much as to become hard-pressed themselves, but “that there will be equality.” The plenty held by one city’s believers supplies the needs in cities that have too little, “*then there will be equality.*” (There’s that troublesome word “equality” again).

Paul does not want to shift the burden of need from one group to another. What he’s calling for is a sharing, an equality, so that those with abundance supply those in need, the end goal being that everyone has enough. “*He that gathered much did not have too much, and he that gathered little did not have too little.*”

Note that Paul did not call for church or government leaders to become Robin Hood and take from one group to give to another. He appealed to the hearts of Christ followers, exhorting them to demonstrate Christ-centered social justice, by valuing their neighbors as highly as they valued themselves. Thus, the love of Christ encouraged what the law could never compell.

Paul's "Enough" rule explained

I've labeled Paul's principle for giving the "Enough" rule. Please understand, when I say we're to give "enough" I don't mean the bare minimum. Quite the opposite. I mean we're to give enough to take care of the needs we have the means to meet. Also note that Paul was not making new laws (nor am I); he was explaining, as an Apostle chosen by Christ Jesus, a principle for giving that is based on love, not a predetermined percentage.

Many of us are good at accumulating money and other resources, but not good at sharing. We gather way more than we need, while others have way too little. Though we want to follow Jesus, we're blind to the fact that by not sharing more generously we're storing up hands and feet and eyes in a way Jesus would never even consider. Jesus never put a limit on his giving, so how can we put a limit on ours, be it our money or our lives?

At this point, with the discussion having moved from mildly uncomfortable to the "Get out of my face!" stage, I feel it is important to insert a reminder. If you are feeling some heat, it is not coming from me; it's because of the words and life examples of John The Baptist, Jesus, Paul and hundreds of first century Christ Followers. Let's go back to Paul and the Corinthian Church.

Motivation is everything

After explaining how he intends for the believers in Corinth to share with others, Paul adds a promise: *"Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work."* (II Corinthians 9:6-8)

Giving is to be from the heart, out of gratitude to God, not reluctantly or under compulsion, but "cheerfully." And giving is to

be done thoughtfully, prayerfully; according to need, not a formula or legalistic requirement (“*Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give...*”). And giving from the heart is rewarded with the promise of receiving “*all that you need*” so “*you will abound in every good work.*”

The Pharisees gave sacrificially, yet Jesus called them hypocrites. That’s because Jesus could see into their hearts. He knew their gifts were not motivated by love. Motivation is the key to the acceptability of our gifts, as we read in I Corinthians 13:3: “*And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.*”

When we give as God intends, we may not have all we want, but we are promised all we need to continue doing good work. The good work we do becomes a witness to the world, as Jesus tells us in John 13:34-35: “*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*”

John 3:16 is also on point: “*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.*” As this verse points out, God responded to our need out of love, giving what was most precious to Him so that we “*should not perish.*”

Where our hearts go, our wallets follow

It seems to me that as Christians grow in maturity, the question about giving changes from “Should I?” to “How much do I?” As we continue to mature spiritually the question changes once again, this time to the most difficult one of all: “How much do I keep?” Because Jesus doesn’t give us a formula, we have to work out for ourselves what to give and what to keep for ourselves.

What our culture and our desires say we “need” to enjoy life and social standing is one thing. What is required so we can “abound in every good work” is another and the two will always be in tension.

If our commitment is to obey Jesus, can any of us who have more than we need honestly say we love God and our neighbors when many neighbors don't have food to eat, clothes to wear, or safe places to sleep? Is it really enough to give our pocket change, frayed clothing and worn-out furniture? Recycling is a good thing, but I'm certain that donating our castoffs to charity is not all that God wants from us in the way of sharing.

I've heard it argued, "If tithing was good enough for Abraham, Jacob and the nation of Israel, it should be good enough for us." The scriptures disagree.

If we recognize that the tithe was basically a temple tax, do we really want a tax to be our standard? Do we want to limit the good works we can do with what God gives us? Better yet, let's do away with legalisms, as Jesus did. I believe we should open our eyes to the people and needs we see around us and give as we can ... give enough. Not so we end up in the poor house, but as Paul wrote in Corinthians, so there is equality.

Wisdom of the "Didache"

The "Didache" is probably the earliest non-canonical book about church doctrine. It dates from the end of the first century or very early second, and is generally accepted by Bible scholars as being authentic apostolic instruction.

This little book says: *"To everyone who asks you give, and ask not back. Blessed is he who gives according to the commandment, for he is innocent; woe to him who receives; for if a man has need and receives he shall be innocent; but if a man has not need, he shall give account why he received and for what purpose, and being in distress he shall be examined concerning his needs; and he shall come out thence till he has paid the utmost farthing. But respecting this also it has been said, 'Let your alms drop down on your hands as long as you know to whom you give.'"*

It's well worth taking a few minutes to think about what this means when it says to give to everyone who asks; when it warns that the person who takes what he doesn't really need is asking for

trouble; and when it instructs us to: *“Let your alms drop down on your hands as long as you know to whom you give.”*

I don't always know to whom I give. I respond to unexpected charitable opportunities on an individual basis, sometimes giving when I know little about a person except that they are personally asking me for help. I may not know if someone has a legitimate need or is taking advantage of my good intentions, but I'd rather err on the side of generosity. My solace comes from knowing that God values my heartfelt desire to share. Responsibility for how my gift is used rests squarely on the shoulders of the recipients.

Another pertinent teaching from the *Didache* is: *“For the Father wills that from your blessing gifts should be bestowed on all.”* Compare the *Didache* to II Corinthians 1:3-5: *“...the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.”* God comforts us and gives us blessings not just so we'll be better off, but so we can share His gifts with *“those in any trouble.”*

Yet another *Didache* passage appears to be from Ecclesiastes 4:31: *“Do not be one who stretches out his hands to receive and clutches them tight for giving ...And the way of death is this ... not pitying the poor ... turning away from him who is in need.”*

If there's no tithe, how do we support those called to ministry?

To this point, we've been discussing giving as it pertains to individuals and to groups who have needs we may be able to meet. Another category of giving concerns those who minister to us in our churches or in the broader Christian community. What does the Bible say about supporting them?

Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth offers excellent insights. He tells the Corinthians: *“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? Surely he says this for us, doesn't he?*

“Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? 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. 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? In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.” (I Cor. 9:9-14)

Paul, speaking as an apostle personally chosen by Jesus, states that he and other ministers have a “right” to be supported by those who benefit from their ministries. In fact, Paul writes: “... *the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.*”

Then he reminds the Corinthians that he never insists on exercising this right, so as not to “*hinder the gospel of Christ.*” He doesn’t want anyone to think he is ministering to them from any motivation other than love.

In Paul’s letter I see two principles for us:

1. We who follow Jesus are to support those who sow spiritual seed among us.
2. Ministers of the Gospel should never do anything that hinders the Gospel.

Conclusion

While tithing is the most frequently taught measure of Christ-centered giving, Jesus himself never told anyone other than the Pharisees to tithe, and they were subject to Old Testament Law. What he said is that the Pharisees should love God and love their neighbors, which they weren’t doing, while continuing to tithe in support of their Priesthood, which they were doing.

Likewise, the Apostles did not command tithing, nor was it part of early church life. When some church leaders eventually

began to talk of tithing centuries after Pentecost, it was primarily to help the poor in and around their churches.

The Apostolic Church Fathers confirm that the New Testament standard is to give generously, until no one has too much and no one has too little. I call this the “Enough” rule, but to Jesus and his followers, giving like this doesn’t really need a name; it’s a normal part of life.

In the early church, as seen in II Corinthians 8, some groups of followers were so generous, they had to be told to keep enough for their own needs. Today, many of us are keeping hands, feet, and eyes locked in chests, though all around us there are people in need of them (to borrow Law’s metaphor once again). Surely, the least we can do is to begin to pray daily that God will soften our hearts so we will see these needs and learn to share generously.

Along the way, don’t be surprised if your prayers change from questioning how much to give, to asking God how much to keep for yourself and your family.

Believers sometimes ask: “If everything belongs to God, why doesn’t He just even things out Himself by giving less to the rich and more to the poor?” I wish I knew. What I do know is that God wants us to love Him and love our neighbors. When we do, we are blessed and our neighbors are blessed.

Being blessed, contrary to what the prosperity preachers promise on television, does not mean that giving a dollar will get us two in return. Our giving should never be motivated by a desire to trade something we have for something we want.

If we give generously and God blesses us with more money, He most likely will also bless us with more opportunities to share. Paul expresses that principle in II Corinthians 8, writing that God comforts us *so that* we can comfort others.

How much we share with neighbors in need and how much we give to support our pastors, teachers and other church leaders, is always going to be an individual decision. The quality of our decisions will depend in large part on the quality of our prayer life.

Jesus said this about the widow who gave her last pennies:
“... I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.” (Mark 12:43-44)

Jesus accepted her gift as having great value because of the love and faith behind it, not because of how much she dropped into the offering basket. That's the lesson for all of us. When choosing how much to share and with whom to share, my prayer is that each of us will always be motivated by what is pleasing to God.

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“If the average church should suddenly take seriously the notion that every member - man or woman - is really a minister of Christ, we could have something like a revolution in a very short time.”

D. Elton Trueblood, educator, author, Christ follower

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