

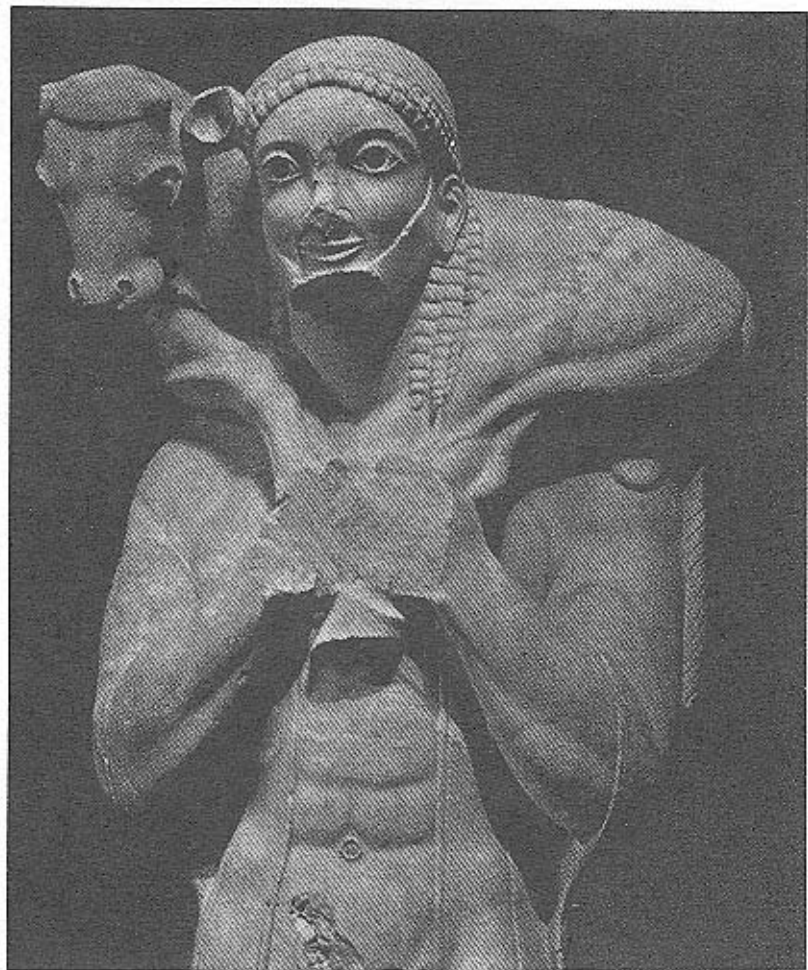
A Tenth of Everything!

Deuteronomy 14:22-29

INTRODUCTION

The greatest source of joy in our lives is our relationship with God. While there are many things which tend to make us joyful, there is nothing that touches our springs of joy at a deeper level than our experience of God's presence. After writing about this experience to his Philippian friends, the Apostle Paul cried out, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!" For good reason, C. S. Lewis' autobiographical account of his journey from atheism to Christianity is entitled, "Surprised by Joy."

Because our relationship with God and the accompanying joy are so important to us, we need specific ways to deepen the relationship and to express our joy. Fortunately, biblical religion is practical and "down-to-earth" in its approach to life. Many practical suggestions are made for strengthening our faith and celebrating it. Among these, one of the most valuable is the practice of tithing. A tithe is a tenth part of our property, produce, or income given for a religious purpose. Tithing was an ancient and widespread practice which had the effect of deepening religious faith. In our own time, increasing numbers of persons are experiencing beneficial results from tithing. It is not uncommon to meet individuals and congregations for whom this practice has become a vital part of their lives.



Calf Bearer of the Acropolis. A votive gift for the goddess Athena. Marble, ca. 570 B.C. Acropolis Museum, Athens.

On the other hand, tithing can be easily abused. It can become a legalistic burden which we lay on ourselves and others. It can arouse guilt in those who do not tithe and spiritual arrogance in those who do. It can become a substitute, as Jesus pointed out, for "weightier matters of the law." Worst of all, tithing can become a way of bargaining with God, trying to force him to give us what we want. When this happens the original purpose of tithing is completely reversed. Understanding the biblical roots of tithing can help us avoid these dangers and benefit fully from the values of this ancient (and modern!) practice.

COMMENTARY

Two of the earliest references to tithing in the Bible occur in dramatic stories of the Patriarchs. According to Genesis 14, Abraham was returning from a military victory when he was met by "Melchizedek king of Salem." The king blessed him and said, "Blessed be Abraham by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand." Then Abraham "gave him a tenth of everything." It seems certain that thanksgiving to "God Most High" was a part of the motivation for this earliest practice of tithing recorded in the Bible.

According to Genesis 28, Jacob had a dream in which "there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!" When Jacob awoke he realized he had been in the presence of God, so he established the place (Bethel) as a religious sanctuary and made a vow to God: "Of all that thou givest me I will give the tenth to thee."

These are dramatic incidents of tithing in the ancient history of Israel, but for those who wish to benefit from the deeper values of tithing, two passages in Deuteronomy are far more helpful: 14:22-29 and 26:1-15. The title of Deuteronomy means "the second law" and refers to the way in which earlier

laws were modified and written to meet the changing situation in Israel's history. Scholars cannot agree on the specific period out of which the book comes, but we do know that it played a vital role in the religious life of the people. Few Old Testament books are quoted or alluded to as frequently in the New Testament as Deuteronomy. In Matthew and Hebrews in particular, its influence is dominant.

According to Deuteronomy 14, the people are given this commandment: "You shall tithe all the yield of your seed, which comes forth from the field year by year." In chapter 26 they are told, "When you come into the land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance, and have taken possession of it, and live in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the Lord your God gives you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place which the Lord your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there." The question of whether or not the tithe and the first fruits are exactly the same is one which is difficult to answer. The fact that the two are mentioned quite closely together, however, indicates that they fulfilled the same basic purpose in the life of the people. That purpose, which was to deepen their relationship with God, was accomplished in at least four different ways.

First, the tithe was a way of *celebrating the goodness of God*. This original purpose of tithing is usually overlooked in modern descriptions of the practice. The people were to go to the place of worship and have a great feast of celebration! "And before the Lord your God, in the place which he will choose, to make his name dwell there, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, of your wine, and of your oil, and the firstlings of your herd and flock." (14:23) Those who lived far from the place of worship could sell the tithe of their produce and take the money with them to the sanctuary, to use for the party! "Spend the money for whatever you desire, oxen, or sheep, or wine or strong drink, whatever your appetite craves; and you shall eat there before the Lord your God and rejoice, you and your household," (vs. 26) Celebration is an essential part of our response

to God's goodness. According to ancient practice, the tithe provided a very practical and enjoyable way of celebrating.

Second, the tithe was a way of *acknowledging God's ownership of all things*. We have already seen how important this idea was in biblical religious experience. It is important also for us. Unfortunately, however, our basic insecurity tempts us to look for peace of mind and wholeness of life in the possession of money and things. We need a continual reminder that God alone is the owner of all things and the ultimate source of our peace and security. In using the tithe for this purpose, many persons find it helpful to speak of "returning" the tithe to God rather than "giving" it to him since it already belongs to him as the sole absolute owner.

Third, the tithe was a way of *maintaining places to worship God*. From earliest times the religious sanctuaries played an important part in the life of the people. But religious sanctuaries required professional leaders to establish and maintain them. A portion of the tithe was to be used for this purpose. "You shall not forsake the Levite who is within your towns, for he has no portion or inheritance with you." (Deut. 14:27) The Book of Numbers is even more specific: "To the Levites I have given every tithe in Israel for an inheritance, in return for their service which they serve, their service in the tent of meeting." (Num. 18:21) In modern times the practice of using a large portion of the tithe given to the church to maintain the "priesthood" and the sanctuary is in accordance with the biblical tradition. The only problem arises when the institution is maintained as an end-in-itself, rather than as a community of faith for the worship and service of God!

Fourth, the tithe was used as a way of *caring for the poor*. Concern for the poor was a major concern of the biblical writers. According to Deuteronomy, the tithe was to be used every third year for this specific purpose: "At the end of every three years you shall bring forth all the tithe of your produce in the same year, and lay it up within your towns; and the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are

within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled.” (Deut. 14:28-29) Loving others persons, especially those in need, has always been an important way of showing our love for God. The tithe provides a specific and effective way of doing this.

Valuable as the practice of tithing can be in deepening our relationship with God, there are at least two dangers involved. One is the temptation to use the tithe as a way of manipulating God. If I tithe, then God can be expected to bless me and reward me in special ways. This attitude appears early in the history of tithing where Jacob agreed to tithe only “if God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear.” (Gen. 28:20) In the later prophets this misuse of tithing is even more obvious. After protesting that the people were not bringing their tithes to the sanctuary, Malachi said, “Bring the full tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house; and thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.” (Malachi 3:10-11) Much of the preaching and literature on tithing in modern times is based on this principle. It is true that those who tithe find their lives blessed in many ways, but tithing *for this reason* has the ultimate effect of weakening our relationship with God.

The other danger is that of feeling satisfied when we reach the goal of tithing, feeling that tithing is all that is required of us in the area of giving. But Jesus made it clear to the Pharisees who were scrupulous tithers that they were not doing enough. (Matt. 23:23-24) Not only were they ignoring the weightier matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faith—but they probably could have given much more of their money also. In addition, Jesus used the example of the widow and her two “mites” to emphasize the important thing is not how much we give, but how much we have left over after we have given! (Mark 12: 41-44)

For many of us the tithe is not nearly enough. It may serve a valuable purpose in the beginning of our Christian life, but many persons who have been tithing are speaking now of

proportionate giving as a better way of responding to God's love. What proportion of my income can I give after taking a realistic look at my resources and the needs of others? How much do I need to have left over in order to free up as much of my income as possible for giving? The answer to these questions is often much more than a tithe.

Money and possessions are important to us because they represent power and influence. They are closely associated with our self-identity and our sense of security. The practice of tithing (or proportionate giving), because it involves something very important to us, therefore represents one of the most authentic and effective ways of deepening our relationship with God and showing how much we love him.



Three Old Women, by Adolphus Ealey, director of the Barnett-Aden Gallery, Washington, D C. Oil