

Should Catholics Tithe?

By Graham Osborne

Tithing is a touchy subject, especially for Catholics. We seem to be known for being relatively stingy with our funds, and maybe it's time to ask *why*? According to some polls, Catholics donate an average of 1% of their annual income, while Protestants donate around 2%. But many Protestants I know readily, happily, donate 10% of their income. And because of this generosity, in some Protestant denominations, if you have one hundred families in a congregation, you have a paid, full time youth minister – and other full time ministries. So what does Scripture and the Church have to say about all this?

From the Church's side of things, there have been varying rates of obligatory and suggested tithes and taxes over the centuries. The history of it all can be quite confusing at times. But Scripture gives us some clear insight.

The word, "tithe", literally means a tenth. The first clear Biblical mention of tithing comes in Genesis 14:19–20 with Abram giving the priest-king of Salem "a tenth of everything" he had gained in battle. The king then blessed him. Similarly, in Genesis 28:20–22 we read where Jacob vowed that, "If God will be with me and protect me... Of *everything* you give me, I will return a tenth part to you without fail."

From that point on, tithing becomes an Old Testament prescription. Leviticus 27:30 states: "All the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the trees, is the LORD's; it is holy to the LORD."

And we also see a particular emphasis on the fact that God will bless those who are generous with their tithes. For example, Proverbs 3:9–10 states: Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.

Similarly, Sirach 35:6-15 exhorts: "Do not appear before the Lord empty-handed... With a generous spirit pay homage to the Lord, and do not spare your freewill gifts... pay your tithes in a spirit of joy. Give to the Most High as he has given to you, generously, according to your means. For he is a God who always repays and will give back to you sevenfold. But offer no bribes; these he does not accept!"

Sirach is emphasizing that our intention has to be pure in our giving. If we give our tithes *because* we think God will reward us sevenfold, then our heart is in

the wrong place. To give God \$7 to get \$49 back... Good deal you say? Hmmm, I wouldn't be so sure...

In Tobit 12:8-9, we also read of the spiritual benefits of tithing as well: "almsgiving with righteousness is better than wealth with wickedness. It is better to give alms than to store up gold, for almsgiving saves from death, and purges all sin. Those who give alms will enjoy a full life."

But in Malachi 3:7-12, we have one of the most striking demands of tithing in all of Scripture. God laments that his people are "*robbing*" him! How? By withholding the tithe!: "Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, 'How are we robbing thee?' In your tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me; the whole nation of you." Wow...

God then goes on to say, *test him* in your tithing: "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... if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing." I don't know of any other place in all of Scripture where God asks us to test *him*. Usually it's *the other way around!* But note the abundance God promises to those who bring in the *full* tithe.

And while the New Testament may not spell out a prescribed "tithe", it certainly emphasizes the principle very clearly: "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" [Luke 6:38].

St Paul gives a beautiful reflection on giving in 2 Cor 9:5-15, teaching that we should give "not as an exaction but as a willing gift." He carries on emphasizing that, "the point is this: he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

He then reflects on how God will respond to this cheerful, from-the-heart generosity: "And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work... He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your resources and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for great generosity... Under the test of this service, you will glorify God by your obedience... and by the generosity of your contribution". Wow! Makes you want to add a zero or two...

And finally, in Matthew 6:19–21, Jesus warns us not to: "store up... treasures on earth... But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy... thieves do not break in and steal", adding, "for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

But while it seems that the Old Testament one tenth was well established, many wonder if a specific tithe/amount still stands today. As mentioned, Scripture seems less clear here, stressing more that one should give from the heart – giving what they feel is right based on how God has blessed them.

In Luke 21:1-4, we see Jesus holding up the example of the widow and her two copper coins, pointing out that all others had "contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all the living that she had." And St Paul directs us that, "every Lord's Day each... should put aside something from what you have earned during the week, and use it for this offering. The amount depends on how much the Lord has helped you earn [1 Corinthians 16:2].

And this would certainly fit with what the Church emphasizes as well. For example, Canon Law 222 states simply that Christians "are obliged to assist with the needs of the Church so that the Church has what is necessary for divine worship... works of the apostolate and of charity, and... support of ministers... to promote social justice... to assist the poor from their own resources."

So while no clear cut amount for a "tithe" seems to be given in New Testament times, consider a final thought.

We tend to go from lesser to greater fulfillment as we move from the Old to New Testament – and we see hearts of stone in the Old replaced with hearts of flesh in the New Covenant, with God's law written on our hearts [cf Ezekiel 36:25-28].

And remember that priest-king from Genesis 14:19-20 that Abram gave his tithe to? His name was "Melchizedek". He was "without beginning of days or end of life, thus made to resemble the Son of God" [Hebrews 7:3]. He "brought out bread and wine", and then blessed Abram. Hebrews 7 then goes on, *against a backdrop of tithing*, to confirm that Jesus is also "a priest forever according to the order of" this same Melchizedek [Hebrews 7:7]. If Abram, with his Old Testament "heart of stone" gave 10%, what are we, who are so abundantly blessed, supposed to give from our hearts? "For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be..."