



Try Ten: A Guide To Tithing

'Tithing' is a word we often hear but rarely understand. Only 4% of American Christians practice tithing (about 20% of American Christians contribute nothing). This holds true for Methodists. In 2004, the average American Methodist gave 1.2% of his or her income to religious organizations—about \$790¹. But for those who tithe, the habit is a deep spiritual practice that can change your understanding of God and deepen your faith.

What is a 'tithe?' The word means 'a tenth' and comes from the Old Testament. The tithe was a sacrificial gift used to support the Levites, who were the only Hebrew tribe not to be given land because they were devoted to the rituals of the Temple. Even the Levites were commanded to tithe from the tithe they received. It continued into the New Testament. Jesus refers to it (Matthew 23:23; Luke 11:42) but warns that it must always be a part of a larger commitment to God's mission (Luke 18:9-14).

Taking a cue from the general principles of tithing reflected in scripture, Mark Allan Powell in *Giving to God* (Eerdmans, 2006) offers four different definitions. A tithe can be

1. 10% of your gross income
2. 10% of your income over and above what you need to give to the church as your share of support for its budgeted expenses. (This is about \$1170 per member at North).
3. 10% of your net income.
4. 10% of your disposable income after you have paid your necessary expenses (e.g. food, mortgage/rent, utilities, etc.)

Regardless of the specific definition you use, a tithe is a regular pattern of giving that challenges us to alter and reexamine our financial activities with the assurance that God is the giver of all we have and that Jesus is Lord of all we do. The practice of tithing should make us wrestle with fundamental questions: Am I aware that everything I have is a gift from God? Am I grateful for what God has given me?

Tithing in the Bible

- Genesis 14:17-20; Hebrews 7:4-10—Abraham gave a tenth of the spoils he won in battle to the priest Melchizedek
- Genesis 28:18-22—Jacob promised to give God a tenth of his possessions
- Leviticus 27:30-33—tithe is holy to the Lord
- Deuteronomy 12:17; 14:22-29; 26:12; Numbers 18:20-32; Nehemiah 10:37-39; 13:12—to support the Levites
- Malachi 3:8-10—robbing God by not tithing

¹ Patrick M. Rooney, 'Dispelling Common Beliefs about Giving to Religious Institutions in the United States,' in *Religious Giving*, ed. David H. Smith (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010) p. 7.

It is impossible (and unwise) to turn the biblical concept of tithing into a legalistic practice. Instead, we should see it as a spiritual discipline like other spiritual practices such as prayer, scripture reading and worship. The purpose of a spiritual discipline is to open up avenues for the Holy Spirit to teach, comfort and deepen our faith. Tithing as a spiritual discipline:

The New Testament on Generosity & Money

- Matthew 6:1-4, 19-21, 24-34
- Luke 21:1-4
- Acts 2:44-47
- 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

- Serves as a regular reminder that God is in charge of our financial situation
- Helps us evaluate our spending and savings in light of God's will
- Demonstrates our dependency on God
- Cultivates a generous attitude
- Celebrates the gifts God has given us

As a spiritual discipline, tithing takes planning. You may not be able to do 10% at first. It can take a couple of years to reposition oneself to be able to tithe. Getting started can be the hardest step because we have to set aside our anxiety about our financial security and trust God to lead us in this process. Whenever we examine our finances it means we are examining our values and our relationships, and this is why tithing is a useful spiritual

discipline. As Jesus said, 'Where your treasure is there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:21).'

If you have never tithed before, take the first step by trying it for a short period of time, such as Lent or Advent. This will be a good first step for tithing to become a regular part of your life in future years. First, review your financial situation and talk with anyone who is important and effected by your financial choices. If you have a partner or spouse, let this be an opportunity to have a conversation that can draw you closer together in the love of God. Second, whenever you do anything with your finances—such as balancing your check book or paying your monthly bills—say this little prayer:

Generous God,
thank you for what I have;
help me to trust in you.
Give me what I need, and
show me what to do,
through Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen.